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Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy: Roadmap to Global Leadership?

John S. Van Oudenaren

Only a short time ago, the question of whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) aspires to global leadership was generally considered farfetched. However, President Xi Jinping's recent announcements of the Global Development Initiative (GDI) at the UN General Assembly in 2021 and the Global Security Initiative

(GSI) at the Boao Forum this April leave little doubt that the PRC is making an active push to become a world leader in all facets ([China Brief](#), May 13; [Xinhuanet](#), September 22, 2021).

Back on the World Stage

In mid-September, Xi traveled outside China for the first time in over two-and-a-half years to visit Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where he attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), September 17). At the summit, Xi stated that humanity has entered a new period of turbulence. In order to navigate these challenging times, he called on all parties to partake in the GSI to enhance security cooperation and the GDI to “deepen practical cooperation” in areas such as trade, investment, infrastructure development and technological innovation ([People's Daily](#), September 17). Several days later, Foreign Minister Wang Yi addressed the UN General Assembly. He echoed Xi’s observation that the world faces immense challenges but also characterized the current moment as “full of hope.” Wang acclaimed the GDI as “a rallying call to refocus attention of the international community on development and build a global community of development,” and for “reducing the peace deficit and providing China’s input to meeting global security challenges” ([FMPRC](#), September 25).



(Image: *A flag-raising ceremony to celebrate the 73rd anniversary of the founding of the PRC in Tiananmen Square in Beijing on October 1, Source: China Military Online)*

The timing of Xi’s first overseas trip since early 2020 suggests confidence in his domestic political position. Despite myriad domestic challenges, Xi had no compunction about departing China a month before the 20th Party Congress begins in Beijing ([China Brief](#), September 20). Ironically, Xi’s failure to appear in public for

eleven days following his return from Samarkand sparked a frenzy of unfounded social media speculation that he had been removed in a coup. However, almost exactly ten days after his return home, Xi made his first public appearance, which strongly suggests he was in quarantine during the interim. It would have been poor political optics for the General Secretary to appear in public immediately after his return with the whole country indefinitely under the strict rule of his zero-COVID policy. When Xi reappeared, he did so alongside all of the other members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the Politburo and other top leaders to open a new exhibit on “Forging Ahead in a New Era” in Beijing ([People.cn](#), September 27). At the exhibit opening, both Xi and ideology czar and PBSC member Wang Huning acclaimed the wisdom of the path that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has taken over the past decade, pledging even stronger efforts to realize the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” ([Xinhuanet](#), September 27; [People.cn](#), September 27).

Great Rejuvenation, Global Dimensions

The PRC’s active promotion of its new global governance initiatives, GDI and GSI, suggests that Xi is primed to accelerate his push for a greater international leadership role coming out of the 20th Party Congress. A foundational element of Xi’s mass appeal is that he has amalgamated the dynastic legacy of China’s civilizational centrality in East Asia with the post-1949 dream of a PRC-led developing world. This is reflected in his fondness for opening major speeches with paeans to Chinese civilization and its 5,000-year-old history ([Xinhuanet](#), July 1, 2021). Xi’s panegyrics to past glory are invariably followed by lamentations over the subsequent century of humiliation imposed by the West and Japan, an interruption of China’s civilizational greatness, which was only rectified with the founding of the PRC in 1949. According to the CCP’s official narrative, under Xi’s leadership, China has not only reclaimed its past greatness but has now reached a zenith, a “new historic juncture” when “China will make even greater contributions to humanity” ([Gov.cn](#), November 16, 2021).

Given its genesis in the “China Dream” and the first centenary (2021) goal of achieving “a moderately prosperous society,” some might assume that the pursuit of national rejuvenation is an altogether domestic endeavor. However, the second centenary goal, which Xi set forth at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, is global in scope, stipulating that by mid-century the PRC will be a “great modern socialist country” that is “a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence” ([China Daily](#), November 4, 2017). Becoming a global leader requires China not only to become the world’s strongest country, but also to attain international authority; for small states and middle powers to be receptive to its influence, and for all countries, including other great powers, to demonstrate respect for its political system, sovereignty and interests.

Theoretical Underpinnings

As a self-proclaimed opponent of hegemony, international security has traditionally been the area of global governance where Beijing has been most reticent. However, under Xi, the PRC has shifted from a foreign policy of “keeping a low profile” to one of “striving for achievements” ([Cankao Xiaoxi](#), January 14, 2014). The blueprint for this shift is Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, which, per State Councilor Yang Jiechi, provides a “guide to action for steering the major changes of the world in the right direction, resolving the international security dilemma, realizing common development around the world, safeguarding people’s lives and health, and upholding true multilateralism” ([FMPRC](#), May 16).

In May, the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), which is affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, published an article by Wang Jue and Liu Jun on “The Core Tenets of the Global Security Initiative: Theoretical Innovation and Global Significance” ([CIIS](#), May 10). The piece asserts that the “holistic national security concept” (总体国家安全观, *zongti guojia anquan guan*), first advanced by Xi in 2014, is a key element of GSI that transcends Western security theory. As Joel Wuthnow observes, the holistic national security concept’s “key characteristic is that the party cannot think of security in narrow, traditional terms,” and that security “must be defined more broadly to encompass diverse areas such as cybersecurity, biosecurity, energy security,” counterterrorism and environmental security ([China Brief](#), November 23, 2021). Wang and Liu assert that the “holistic national security concept” surmounts the two stumbling blocks that have bedeviled modern, Western-dominated international relations: “the Thucydides Trap” (heightened risk of conflict when a rising power threatens to supplant the leading power in the system) and the “Kindleberger Trap” (no power predominates, which creates a deficit of global public goods). Per Wang and Liu, the GSI is Xi’s great contribution to overcoming a world where the “weak devour the strong” (弱肉强食, *ruorouqiangshi*). In contrast to what the CCP portrays as U.S.-driven zero-sum bloc confrontation, the GSI provides a mechanism to peacefully resolve disputes, advance “common security” and achieve “win-win” outcomes. The GSI promotes “common security” over “hegemonic stability” to escape the “Kindleberger Trap” and offset the global governance deficit.

The influence of moral realism, which blends classical realism, neorealism and classical Chinese political philosophy, is strongly apparent in Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and its practical manifestations: GSI, GDI, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The progenitor of moral realism is Tsinghua University Professor Yan Xuetong, who breaks with many contemporary Western realists to contend that morality has always played a key role in international politics and was integral to the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau and others. [1] Yan earned his doctorate at Berkley, where he studied under the father of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz. In addition to his scholarship, he also directly contributes to Beijing’s efforts to improve its international standing as secretary general of the World Peace Forum, which is held in conjunction with the PRC State Council and the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs ([China Brief](#), July 29; [Tsinghua University](#), July 6).

Yan holds a fundamentally realist worldview but argues that the morality of states matters as it bears on their strategic credibility. In his 2019 book, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, Yan emphasizes the salience of effective leadership to meet domestic challenges and to build and maintain international strategic credibility. [2] Historically, the most successful great powers have sustained primacy not simply through raw strength but through their ability to gain the trust of allies. Interestingly, Yan identifies this as a key reason for the different fates of the U.S. and the Soviet Union in the Cold War: “the cases of the Warsaw Pact and NATO demonstrate how the international leadership of superpowers can have different effects. Leading states with high strategic credit are able to establish and expand unbreakable alliances, while the opposite is true for states without high credibility.”

Conclusion

The PRC is advancing GDI and the GSI even as it struggles with a major economic slowdown exacerbated by the twin drags of the bursting of its real estate bubble and the zero-COVID policy. The collapse of the property sector has led to a precipitous decline in local government revenues, which puts pressure on the center to provide more stimulus that could eventually lead to fiscal trade-offs ([China Brief](#), September 20). Although the PRC still has a substantial fiscal arsenal, it is unlikely to be able to direct the same levels of enormous capital overseas as during the first half-decade (2014-2018) of BRI, when the PRC annually surpassed \$100 billion in outward investment ([AEI](#), July 14).

The post-COVID shift in global public opinion, with unfavorable views of China near historic highs in many countries, also challenges Xi's vision of the PRC as a global leader ([Pew](#), September 28). However, in the CCP's telling, such negative views are invariably blamed on "Western anti-China forces" that manipulate international public opinion to conduct smear campaigns against China on sensitive issues such as Xinjiang and Tibet ([FMPRC](#), June 29).

Despite mounting domestic challenges and a difficult international environment, the PRC appears determined to push forward with its quest for global leadership. This is in part motivated by the PRC's efforts to insulate itself from Western, particularly U.S., power and pressure. However, the achievement of a leading role in world affairs is also an integral part of the great rejuvenation narrative and, as a result, is bound up with Xi's domestic political standing. As Xi maintains, China is closer than ever to its long-sought goal of a modern renaissance, but realizing this great rejuvenation is not "something that can be achieved easily by beating gongs and drums" but requires ever more arduous striving ([Qiushi](#), September 30). The "great struggle" (伟大斗争, *weida douzheng*) against all those, inside and outside China, who stand in the way of the great rejuvenation is clearly just getting started.

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Notes

[1] Yan Xuetong, "[From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement](#)," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 7, Issue 2, Summer 2014

[2] Yan Xuetong, [Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers](#) (Princeton University Press, 2019).

Exploring the Domestic Foundations of Chinese Economic Sanctions: The Case of Australia

Scott Waldron, Victor Ferguson and Darren Lim



(Image: Customs officials in Jiangsu province, **Source:** China Daily)

Introduction

More than two years have passed since the People's Republic of China (PRC) began imposing a broad range of restrictions on Australian trade in what is widely regarded to be a campaign of economic coercion. Despite the apparent sanctions affecting numerous Australian export industries with high exposure to the mainland market, there is now a broad consensus that Beijing's efforts have been unsuccessful. [1] The measures had a negligible impact on the Australian macroeconomy and did not drive Canberra to make any policy concessions to address Beijing's long list of ostensible grievances ([Australian Department of Treasury](#), September 6, 2021).

It is well established that economic sanctions often fail to change state behavior, typically because the political demands of the sanctioning state are too high. But most sanctions still impose significant economic costs on

their targets. Curiously—despite a widely held view that Australia was highly vulnerable to Chinese economic pressure ([Global Times](#), June 10, 2020)—Beijing’s campaign fell short and appeared poorly targeted. The overwhelming majority of affected Australian industries were able to redirect their exports to other markets without significant friction.[2] The economic costs of some barriers, such as those on barley, were significantly higher for China than Australia ([Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences](#), June 2020). Some of Australia’s industries that are most reliant on the Chinese market were left untouched altogether. [3]

If—as is widely assumed—China’s objective was to coerce, why did its apparent sanctions not hit the mark and asymmetrically impose politically significant costs on the Australian economy? Exploring this question can yield new insight into the dynamics shaping Chinese economic sanctions—an instrument of statecraft Beijing continues to employ regularly, including recently against Lithuania in 2021 and Taiwan in early August ([PRC Charge d’affaires Lithuania](#), May 3; [United Daily News](#), August 5).

Explaining the Australian Case

Existing explanations of the limited impacts of the sanctions have focused on factors external to China, such as the adjustment strategies adopted by sanctioned Australian actors and the respite afforded to those actors by positive trends in global commodity markets. [4] But what about factors on the Chinese side? Given that Chinese foreign policy initiatives are often formed by compromises between agencies and are sometimes undermined by the sub-state actors tasked with implementing them, it is worthwhile exploring how the process of introducing sanctions inside China may contribute to their apparent ineffectiveness. [5] Here, we examine open-source reporting on the Chinese actors that initiated the barriers and how those barriers were imposed in practice (see Table 1). We consider how these factors potentially shaped which Australian industries were targeted and the nature of the disruption that occurred.

How China Imposes Sanctions

Examining Chinese sanctions is complicated by Beijing’s novel approach to implementation. Most governments in world politics declare their imposition of sanctions publicly, promulgate restrictions in official regulations, and link the measures imposed to explicit objectives vis-à-vis a target country. By contrast, Beijing seldom acknowledges it is imposing sanctions, and does not state specific demands or policy objectives. Nor are restrictions imposed via formal sanctioning laws that specify what trade is restricted and which agency is responsible for enforcement. To provide scope for officials to deny that trade is being restricted for political reasons, restrictions are typically implemented via ‘informal’ means that provide another explanation for disruption such as by fomenting consumer boycotts, privately instructing firms to stop trade with a target, or citing technical legal violations—such as contraventions of sanitary and phytosanitary rules—to block trade. Unpacking the origins of China’s sanctions therefore requires one to engage in an exercise of reverse-engineering—beginning from observed trade disruption and working backwards to uncover how it was implemented, which actors were responsible for initiation, and what their underlying motivations may have been. The Australian case suggests at least three origins.

Origin 1: Top-down

Some restrictions appear to have been directed by central authorities in Beijing. This is most evident in cases where restrictions were implemented by central agencies, and where there was apparent coordination between different actors across the bureaucracy targeting specific Australian products.

First, some barriers were initiated by China's central-level Customs Administration (GACC). Australian coal exports were blocked at ports across China after an order was issued by GACC to all local jurisdictions ([Guancha](#), November 25, 2020). GACC was also responsible for declining to renew export permits for 25 of 28 Australian registered forage exporters ([Global Times](#), April 20, 2021).

Other restrictions appear to have been initiated by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), another central agency, which appeared to leverage its jurisdiction over the Tariff Rate Quota (TRQ) allocation which local companies rely on to import Australian cotton and coal. Given the opacity of the TRQ system ([World Trade Organization](#), 2021), the NDRC is in a powerful position to direct company import decisions, including country sources. In the days leading to the opening of TRQ applications for cotton (October 15, 2020) importers were verbally instructed to not buy Australian cotton ([Grain Central](#), October 16, 2020). State-owned coal enterprises were also reported to have received verbal notice from Customs to not buy Australian coal ([Sina](#), October 13, 2020). A month later, the NDRC increased China's annual coal import quota, but excluded Australia ([South China Morning Post](#), November 27, 2020).

Coordination between central agencies was seen in at least two cases. As noted above, Australian coal was subject to both non-tariff barriers from Customs and quota restrictions from the NDRC. After tariffs and countervailing measures were applied to barley by China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM, see below), the GACC imposed further restrictions (citing biosecurity concerns) on barley when Australian exporters sought to circumvent the tariffs ([Grain Central](#), October 28, 2021).

In practice, such top-down measures were most likely directed by a central body—probably within the State Council or NDRC—which coordinated the industries to be targeted, how disruption would occur, and which departments would execute them. If this is the case, there are two possible implications. First, if the objective of the sanction was to impose maximum economic costs on Australia, the barriers were poorly designed. Technical input from state units with a deep understanding of global commodity markets and Australia's integration in them was either not sought or not taken up by decision-makers. Alternatively, it may suggest that the sanctions were motivated by other objectives.

Origin 2: Industry bodies and bureaucratic interests

A second set of restrictions appear to have originated with domestic industry groups and bodies within the Chinese bureaucracy motivated to support sanctions due to parochial interests. This applies especially to the anti-dumping and subsidy restrictions imposed on Australian barley and wine.

The investigation into Australian barley was formally initiated by the China Chamber of Commerce in 2018 and ruled upon by MOFCOM in May 2020. The barriers on barley appear to be at least partly driven by the objective of vulnerability mitigation, where China is seeking to reduce dependence for key food products from any single

country and to protect domestic production ([The Diplomat](#), June 19, 2020). The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs had large input into the case, including through a formal submission to the investigation ([MOFCOM](#), 2020). The submission opposing the tariffs by the China Alcoholic Drinks Association (Beer Sub-association, comprised of Chinese brewers that used Australian barley) was brushed aside.

In the case of wine, the investigation was initiated by the China Alcoholic Drinks Association (Wine Sub-association) in August 2020, and subsequently ruled on by MOFCOM in November of the same year ([MOFCOM](#), 2020). Barriers on wine can be seen as a case of orthodox protectionism to address the grievances of Chinese wine companies that have long complained that Australian imports were capturing their market share ([Future Directions](#), February 23, 2021; [Wine China](#), April 19, 2018). While the restrictions may have partially followed a coercive logic, there are reasons to believe that they were pushed by domestic actors who saw a chance to leverage the China-Australia dispute to advance their own causes.

The notion that certain restrictions were imposed not to maximize coercive pressure on Australia but because targeting a certain industry was consistent with protectionist or other industry policy objectives is not surprising. A rich body of academic literature demonstrates how sanctions may often end up reflecting the preferences of core domestic interest groups from the private sector or within the state bureaucracy, including in the Chinese context. [6] This may help explain the limited costs generated by the restrictions on Australian trade.

Origin 3: Bottom-up

Finally, some restrictions appear to have emerged in an ad hoc way from the bottom up. This was seen in the technical and biosecurity barriers for several commodities, which were initiated by individual local-level Customs Administrations. Australian beef and lobsters were initially held up at Shanghai Port and airport in a provincial Customs Administration known to be strict. Guangdong Customs appeared heavily involved in the initial holdup of logs ([Australian Financial Review](#), November 8, 2020; [Asia Beef Network](#), June 2020; [World Trade Organization](#), 2021). In these cases, the barriers began locally before they were followed in other provinces.

While top-down imposition cannot be ruled out, the uneven rollout of the measures is more consistent with local initiative. Moreover, the types of technical breaches identified would, in normal times, be overlooked or resolved within months, which did not happen in this case. The deterioration of Sino-Australian relations in 2020-2021 occurred alongside other policy campaigns and dynamics related to China's international trade, including the dual circulation policy, concerns about food self-sufficiency and import diversification and a political environment where officials were rewarded for adopting nationalistically assertive and even truculent postures towards foreigners, so-called 'wolf warrior diplomacy' ([NetEase](#), 14 July, 2021; [MOFCOM](#), July 14, 2020; [Gov.cn](#), April 27, 2020). This backdrop may have created incentives for local officials to initiate barriers on Australian trade to display nationalism, fealty and advance their careers. With vertical reporting lines and Party offices embedded throughout government agencies, doing so would not go unnoticed.

In such cases, the decision to target certain Australian industries may not have been specifically calculated to coerce at all. Instead, certain products may have faced barriers because a genuine – if minor – infringement

was leveraged by local actors to advance their own interests, albeit conditional on the disruption being deemed acceptable by their superiors.

Implications

Our analysis suggests that the drivers of China's barriers on Australian exports vary by commodity, that restrictions were introduced by diverse actors with multiple objectives, and that the targets were at times potentially ad hoc and ill-considered. These characteristics, arising from the somewhat ambiguous and generally poorly understood bureaucratic processes underpinning the implementation of China's sanctions, provide additional insight into why the barriers fell short of imposing the sorts of costs necessary for compelling policy change in Canberra.

At least two implications arise from the picture we have painted. The first is that any assessment of whether Chinese sanctions have or have not 'failed' needs to consider the fact that the decision to sanction, and the subsequent execution of that decision, are unlikely to be precisely crafted towards the single end of maximizing economic costs on politically salient industries in target states so as to cause behavioral change. In the Australian case, other plausible objectives include achieving domestic goals related to food security and protectionism, sending deterrence signals to other countries, or even an effort by the PRC to meet the terms of the 2020 'Phase One' deal with the U.S. [7] That multiple goals may exist is not controversial—and has indeed been acknowledged by sanctions scholars since at least the 1970s. [8] James Reilly notes that China's use of economic statecraft more broadly aims to pursue multiple goals simultaneously. [9] However, the objective, origins and multiplicity of contemporary Chinese sanction episodes is seldom discussed.

The analysis also has implications for discussions of how Chinese sanctions end. Following recent reports that China was mulling the removal of the ban on Australian coal, some have speculated that other measures might also be removed because they are perceived to have been ineffective at imposing costs ([Bloomberg](#), July 14; [News.com.au](#), July 15). However, one should not hold their breath. Removal may not be straightforward if actors within the Chinese system still view the restrictions to be achieving other goals.

Table 1. The domestic foundations of Chinese restrictions on Australian exports 2020/21

Commodity	Barrier / instrument	Initiating actor	Proceeding measures
Beef	Technical barriers to trade (labelling, certification)	Shanghai Customs Administration, Port	Other provincial and central Customs Administrations
	Other Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) barriers (anti-biotics),	Various local Customs Administrations	

	voluntary suspensions due to COVID		
	Linked to suspension of export permits	Central Customs Administration (GACC)	
Lobsters	Holdup (citing need to test for metal content)	Shanghai Customs Administration, Airport	Other provincial Customs Administrations
Logs	SPS / biosecurity	Guangdong Customs Administration	Other provincial Customs Administrations GACC notified WTO
Coal	Holdup (citing environmental standards)	GACC	
	Verbal informal instruction	GACC, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM)	
	Quota allocation	NDRC and MOFCOM	
Cotton	Verbal informal instruction	NDRC and MOFCOM	
Forages	Export permits	GACC	
Wine	Tariffs	China Alcoholic Drinks Association, Wine Sub-Association bought case	MOFCOM ruling

Barley	Tariffs and countervailing measures	China Chamber of Commerce bought case, submission by the Ministry of Rural Affairs	MOFCOM ruling
	Biosecurity – leading to company (CBH) suspension	GACC	

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Notes

[1] See Alan Beattie, [“Australia offers timely lessons in resisting Chinese trade coercion,”](#) Financial Times, February 9, 2022; Jeffrey Wilson, [“Australia Shows the World What Decoupling From China Looks Like,”](#) Foreign Policy, November 9, 2021.

[2] Especially those that produce relatively homogenous commodities traded in bulk in global markets. See Victor Ferguson, Scott Waldron, and Darren Lim, [“Market adjustments to import sanctions: lessons from Chinese restrictions on Australian trade, 2020–21,”](#) *Review of International Political Economy*, July 2022.

[3] In some cases, most notably iron ore, industries were likely untouched because disrupting trade would have been very costly for Beijing. However, cost-avoidance does not explain why some other unaffected industries that asymmetrically rely on the Chinese market (such as dairy) were not targeted.

[4] Victor Ferguson, Scott Waldron, and Darren Lim, [“Market adjustments to import sanctions: lessons from Chinese restrictions on Australian trade, 2020–21,”](#) *Review of International Political Economy*, July 2022.

[5] Such work emerges from the long-standing literature on '[Fragmented Authoritarianism](#)' in China. See Susan Shirk, "The Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Security Policies," in Saadia M. Pekkanen (ed.) et al. *The Oxford Handbook of the International Relations of Asia*, (Oxford Handbooks, 2014); Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri. [Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise](#). (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

[6] See for example William H. Kaempfer and Anton D. Lowenberg, "[The Theory of International Economic Sanctions: A Public Choice Approach](#)," *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Sep., 1988), pp. 786-793; Darren Lim and Victor Ferguson, "[Informal economic sanctions: the political economy of Chinese coercion during the THAAD dispute](#)," *Review of International Political Economy*, (2021): 1-24.

[7] On signalling to other countries, see Stephen Kirchner, "[A Geoeconomic Alliance: The potential and limits of economic statecraft](#)", United States Studies Centre, September 30, 2021. On China's use of informal trade barriers to partially fulfil the 'Phase One' deal, see Tuo Chen, Chang-tai Hsieh and Zheng Michael Song, '[Non-tariff barriers in the U.S.-China trade war](#)', [National Bureau of Economic Research](#), August 2022. Australia and the U.S. compete for a number of markets in China.

[8] James Barber, "[Economic Sanctions As a Policy Instrument](#)," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs), Vol. 55, No. 3 (Jul., 1979), pp. 367-384.

[9] James Reilly, *Orchestration: [China's Economic Statecraft Across Asia and Europe](#)* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

The PLA's Military Diplomacy Leading up to the 20th Party Congress (Part Two)

Kenneth W. Allen



(Image: Members of the PLA Navy wave farewell to their Russian counterparts during the closing ceremony of the International Army Games (IAG) 2022, Sea Cup contest near Qingdao in August **(Source:** CMO)

Editor's Note: This is the second article in a two-part series on PLA military diplomacy. The first article focused on leader-level engagement. This piece examines specific areas of activity in the PLA's military diplomacy. For part one, click [here](#).

Introduction

Despite some limitations, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) military diplomacy activities have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic ([China Brief](#), July 21, 2021). In addition to senior-level engagement and strategic dialogue, PLA military diplomacy entails specific operational, training, educational or humanitarian engagements with foreign partners. These activities, which are the focus of this article, include carrying out non-traditional security operations; conducting bilateral and multilateral joint exercises; undertaking academic exchanges; and providing humanitarian and disaster relief, including medical aid. In carrying out military diplomacy, the PLA's self-proclaimed objectives are to deepen ties with foreign militaries and defense establishments; safeguard China's sovereignty, territorial integrity, development and all-around interests; contribute to building a world-class military; and promote a positive international image of China as a contributor to global peace and security ([PLA Daily](#), June 16).

Providing COVID-19 Relief Supplies Abroad

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the PLA has provided dozens of countries with COVID-19 relief supplies, including Chinese-produced vaccines ([China Brief](#), June 21, 2021). A PLA spokesperson noted at the National People's Congress in March that by providing medical assistance to other countries grappling with the pandemic, the PRC was acting as both a responsible international leader and reciprocating other nations' assistance and well wishes during China's time of need ([China Military Online](#) [CMO], March 10):

"When China was at the height of fighting the pandemic, the defense departments and militaries of many foreign countries lent a helping hand to China. The defense and military leaders of more than 20 countries, including Pakistan, Belarus and Cambodia, sent letters of support, and the defense and military authorities of countries like Trinidad and Tobago, Mongolia, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia donated anti-pandemic emergency supplies and funds. Besides, the military attachés of foreign embassies in Beijing as well as foreign students in China all expressed their support and best wishes through videos and letters. Furthermore, to implement Chinese President Xi Jinping's important declaration on making China's COVID-19 vaccines a global public good, the Chinese military has so far provided vaccine aid to the militaries of more than 30 countries, including Pakistan, Cambodia, Mongolia, Equatorial Guinea, Tunisia, Lebanon, Hungary, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Bolivia. [1]It has also carried out anti-pandemic cooperation with the militaries of over 50 countries, in the form of providing anti-pandemic supplies, sending military medical expert teams, and holding experience-sharing video meetings. By fulfilling its international obligations and providing public security products during the pandemic, the Chinese military's pragmatic measures have been highly recognized and widely welcomed by the international community."

Several countries, such as Pakistan received batches of supplies over a two-year period. Based on photos from multiple articles, it appears that PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) Y-20 transport aircraft flew most of the supplies to other countries ([CMO](#), June 5). However, some aid was delivered by civilian aircraft and PLAAF Y-9 transports, while some countries, such as Pakistan, sent their own military aircraft to retrieve supplies in China ([PRC Ministry of National Defense \[MND\]](#), April 7, 2021; [CMO](#), February 9, 2021; [MND](#), April 26, 2020).

PLA Navy Gulf of Aden Escort Task Forces

Since 2008, the PLA Navy (PLAN) has deployed 41 rotating, three-ship, counter-piracy escort task force (ETF) formations to the Gulf of Aden. Each ETF is deployed for about six months, including serving for about three months in the Gulf of Aden and then conducting port calls and training events on the way home. For example, the 36th ETF, which consisted of a guided-missile destroyer, a missile frigate and a comprehensive supply ship, departed Qingdao on March 5, 2020, participated in the multinational naval exercise "Peace 21" off of Pakistan in February 2021 and then conducted a joint naval drill with Singapore while enroute home. After 184 days, it arrived home on March 8, 2021([CMO](#), March 8, 2021; [Xinhuanet](#), February 11, 2021). On September 26, 2021, the 39th ETF, which consisted of the guided-missile destroyer *Urumqi*, the guided-missile frigate *Yantai*, and the comprehensive supply ship *Taihu*, departed the Northern Theater Command Navy's port at Qingdao, Shandong Province ([CMO](#), March 9). China, Russia, and Iran held their second joint maritime exercise in the Gulf of Oman from January 18 to 20, 2022 ([MND](#), January 20). The PLAN vessels included the *Urumqi* and *Taihu* from the 39th ETF. The task force returned home in early March. During the 165 day mission, which

covered about 90,000 nautical miles, the ETF escorted 28 batches of 48 Chinese and foreign ships. Once the 40th ETF arrived in late January, the 39th ETF participated in two separate joint training exercises, but it does not appear to have made any port calls on the way home. The first exercise from January 18-20 involved the naval forces of China, Iran, and Russia, which undertook their second joint maritime exercise in the Gulf of Oman ([MND](#), January 20). China dispatched a guided-missile destroyer, a supply ship, ship-borne helicopters and 40 marines to the exercise. On January 24, the PLAN and Russian Navy held a joint maritime anti-piracy exercise in the northern Arabian Sea ([MND](#), January 25). A total of five naval vessels, ship-borne helicopters and marines from the two sides participated in the exercise, which focused on joint anti-piracy operations. The participating ship formations conducted drills on joint maneuvering, rescuing hijacked ships, and airlift evacuation of the wounded.

On January 15, the 40th ETF comprising the guided-missile destroyer *Hohhot*, guided-missile frigate *Yueyang* and comprehensive supply ship *Luomahu*, departed the Southern Theater Command Navy's port in Zhanjiang, Guangdong Province, carrying two shipborne helicopters and more than 700 servicemembers including dozens of special operation troops ([CMO](#), January 16). During the mission, which lasted for 172 days and covered about 90,000 nautical miles, the ETF escorted 30 batches of Chinese and foreign ships and provided medical assistance to one ship ([CMO](#), July 7). Unlike ETFs before COVID-19, there was no mention of the ETF conducting port calls on the way home. On May 18, the 41st ETF, which consists of the guided-missile destroyer *Suzhou*, the guided-missile frigate *Nantong*, and the comprehensive supply ship *Chaohu*, as well as two ship-borne helicopters and several dozen special operations troops, departed from the Eastern Theater Command Navy's port in Zhoushan City, Zhejiang Province, for its mission ([CMO](#), May 19). This is the first time that either the *Suzhou* and or the *Nantong* have performed escort missions.

Bilateral and Multilateral Joint Military Exercises

Since mid-2021, the PLA has conducted several bilateral and multilateral joint exercises with foreign militaries. [2] Of note, the PLA Rocket Force (formerly the Second Artillery Force) has never conducted any joint training with a foreign country. The following subsections provide a rough overview of recent joint exercises by service.[3]

PLA Army

From September 11 to 25, 2021, 550 Army personnel and 130 vehicles and equipment from the Northern Theater Command participated in the "Peace Mission 2021" exercise at Russia's Donguz training ground in Orenburg Oblast (CMO, [August 27, 2021](#); [September 10, 2021](#)). The PLA Army also participates in various bilateral and multilateral exercises as discussed in the Joint Service Exercises with Foreign Militaries and International Army Games subsections below.

PLA Navy Exercises and Port Calls

In September 2021, five PLAN and Singapore Navy vessels, including guided-missile destroyers, guided-missile frigates, and a comprehensive supply ship, participated in a joint naval drill in waters near Singapore ([CMO](#), September 24, 2021).

In November 2021, the PLAN and Vietnamese Navy conducted their 31st joint patrol in the Beibu Gulf ([CMO](#), December 3, 2021). China and Vietnam each dispatched two naval vessels to this joint patrol, which lasted about 28 hours and entailed total travel of 250 nautical miles. During the patrol, the ships communicated on hydrological and meteorological conditions, sea and air conditions, and the heading and speed of the fleets. They also alternated command of the fleets, carried out light signal exercise, and launched a joint search and rescue drill.

From July 10-13, the PLAN and Pakistan Navy conducted the “Sea Guardians-2” joint maritime exercise in the waters off of Shanghai, which was arranged according to the annual military cooperation plan of the two navies ([MND](#), July 10; [CMO](#), July 13). The drills comprised two phases, including port planning and a maritime exercise. During the first phase, the two sides carried out onshore activities such as operation planning, professional expertise exchanges, cultural and sports competitions. The joint drills phase included attacking maritime targets, tactical maneuver, anti-submarine operation, replenishment at sea, reinforcing damaged ships, anti-aircraft and anti-missile operations, etc. The PLAN vessels involved are assigned to the Eastern Theater Command Navy, included guided-missile frigates *Xiangtan* and *Shuozhou*, the comprehensive supply ship *Qiandaohu*, as well as a submarine, an early warning aircraft, two fighter jets and a helicopter. The Pakistani Navy sent the Frigate *Taimur* to participate in the exercise. This was the second exercise in the China-Pakistan “Sea Guardians” series, the first occurred in January 2020 in the northern Arabian Sea.

From October 17-23, 2021, the Chinese and Russian navies organized a joint cruise in the Western Pacific Ocean for the first time ([CMO](#), October 23, 2021). The combined ship formation conducted drills on joint navigation, joint maneuver and practical use of weapons, which involved ten vessels and six shipborne helicopters. They apparently conducted another mission off of Alaska in September ([Navy Times](#), September 26).

The PLAN has also used port calls as a tool for military diplomacy. For example, PLAN vessels began visiting the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in 1976 and have continued since the early 2000s, but these deployments have not been high in number, with approximately 17 separate PLAN port calls to various PICs from 2017–2020. [4]

In regards to the PLAN’s increasingly active military diplomacy in the PICs, three items are notable. First, medical diplomacy, which has involved the *Peace Ark* hospital ship, remains an important component of PLAN deployments. Second, PLAN training ships have regularly visited Fiji as part of the overall strengthening of relations between the PLA the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. Fiji has become a regular port call and resupply stop for PLAN and other PRC vessels operating in Oceania. During the *Peace Ark*’s “Harmonious Mission 2014,” Fiji was the second stop on a four-country voyage. The hospital ship visited Fiji again in 2019 while in transit between China and South America. Training ships of the PLA Navy have also made port calls to Fiji. In 2016, the *Zheng He* visited Fiji after a goodwill visit to Australia, and the *Qi Jiguang* visited in 2019. The PLAN provided a hydrographic research vessel to the Fijian Navy and is also providing training on operating the ship. China donated vehicles to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, stating they could be used for disaster relief from typhoons and for COVID-19 response. Third, oceanographic research vessels have steadily become more active in the Pacific.

PLA Air Force Exercises

On November 19, 2021, the PLAAF and Russian Air Force conducted a joint aerial strategic patrol in the Asia-Pacific region ([CMO](#), November 19, 2021). Two PLAAF H-6K bombers and two Russian Tu-95MC bombers conducted the joint patrol in airspace over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. During the flight, the aircraft observed international law and did not enter the airspace of other countries. This was the third China-Russia joint aerial strategic patrol. The stated aim of the exercise is to develop the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in the new era, upgrade the strategic coordination and joint operational capabilities of the two sides, and jointly protect global strategic stability.

China and Thailand have held five *Falcon Strike* exercises (2015, 2017, 2018, and 2019), all at Thailand's Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, with the objective of testing tactics, combat methods, and weaponry, and improving actual combat training ([CMO](#), September 18, 2018). The fifth exercise concluded on August 22 ([MND](#), August 30).

Joint Service Exercises with Foreign Militaries

Russia's large-scale military exercises are scheduled in four major drills on a rotating basis: *Vostok* (East), *Zapad* (West), *Tsentr* (Center), and *Kavkaz* (South), which correlate to Russia's military districts. As such, recent exercises were *Zapad 2017*, which included Belarus; *Vostok 2018*, which included Belarus, China, and Mongolia; *Tsentr 2019*, which included China, Pakistan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; and *Kavkaz 2020*, which included China, Armenia, Pakistan, and even the pseudo-state of Abkhazia. Only the 2018 and 2019 exercises included aircraft from participating air forces ([Middle East Institute](#), November 4, 2020; [TimesNow](#), August 25, 2020).

From August 9-13, 2021, the PLA Army and Air Force hosted Russia's Army and Air Force (five Su-30SM fighters) for the joint "Zapad/Interaction-2021" exercise at the PLA's Qingtongxia Joint Tactical Training Base in Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region ([CMO](#), August 19, 2021). This was the first time that the Russian military dispatched troops to China to join a strategic and operational exercise with drills on more than 20 subjects including joint firepower strikes, joint three-dimensional seizure of targets, joint parachuting assaults, and joint obstacle overcoming during the two phases of joint planning and live-fire operations. The exercise featured a counterterrorism and stability maintenance mission scenario, which required Chinese and Russian troops to jointly carry out strikes in mixed groups. Special operations forces on both sides practiced seizing the high ground and trench in accordance with the pre-plan, and then carried out the task of penetrating the enemy forces. The two sides established a joint command. The troops involved were mainly from the PLA Western Theater Command and Russia's Eastern Military District, with a total of more than 10,000 military personnel and multiple types of aircraft, artillery and armored equipment involved. Participants from both sides were mixed into teams to jointly plan and conduct training together, in a bid to verify and improve their respective capabilities of joint reconnaissance, search and early warning, electronic information attack, and joint attack and elimination.

The Vostok-2022 exercises, which began in late August, included ground forces from Russia, China, India, Belarus, Tajikistan, Mongolia, and other unidentified countries, as well as PLAAF and Russian aircraft. It also involved PLAN and Russian Navy vessels, which conducted at-sea drills ([MND](#), August 30).

International Army Games 2021 and 2022

The International Army Games (IAG) is an annual international military sports event organized by the Russian Ministry of Defence ([Xinhua](#), August 28). The event, which was first staged in August 2015, involves nearly 30 countries taking part in dozens of competitions over two weeks. The PLA has participated each year.

The PLA Army, Navy, and Air Force participated in the International Army Games 2021 (IAG 2021), which took place from August 22 to September 4 and involved several countries (CMO, [August 13](#); [July 29](#)). It is divided into several components and locations, including sites in Russia, China, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Iran and other countries, as detailed below:

- The PLA hosted three International Army Games (IAG) 2021 events in Korla, Xinjiang Autonomous Region, from August 22 to September 4, including the “Suvorov Attack”, “Clear Sky” and “Safe Environment” events. Troops from Russia, Belarus, Egypt, Iran, Venezuela, and Vietnam participated.
- The PLA also sent troops to participate in 17 events abroad, including twelve in Russia, three in Belarus, one in Uzbekistan, and one in Iran.
- “Seaborne Assault”: in Vladivostok, Russia; involves a comprehensive test of the participants’ armored vehicle driving skills, weapon-using skills, and coordinated obstacle-overcoming ability, and tasks of relay, obstacle course and survival path; includes participants from Russia, China (50 PLAN Marines), Iran, and Venezuela.
- “Sea Cup”: in Vladivostok; involves artillery firing against sea/air targets and floating mines, barrel anchoring, damage control and sea rescues; includes Russia, China (PLAN guided-missile frigate *Guangyuan*), Myanmar and Vietnam.
- “Depth”: in Konarak, Iran; no information available.
- “Clear Sky”: in Korla, Xinjiang; no information available.
- “Tank Biathlon”: in Alabino, Russia; involves the individual race and rally race; four tank crews from the 75th Group Army combined arms brigade were selected after over four months of training.
- “Polaris” Special Operations Teams: in Minsk, Russia; first time for PLA involvement; 29 competition events including secret infiltration, combat implementation, and transfer and evacuation, aiming to comprehensively test and improve the water, land, and air penetration capabilities of the participants. The Chinese participating team comprises reconnaissance and special operations troops selected from a special operations brigade of the PLA 74th Group Army.

- “Masters of Armored Vehicles”: location in Russia unknown; event mainly includes the cycling race, vehicle repairing contest, captain contest, and relay race with 5 types of vehicles involved; the PLA Joint Logistic Support Force (JLSF) joined for the first time since its creation in 2016.
- “Military Rally”: location in Russia unknown; event includes the cycling race, chasing race, fire race, team race and field cooking competition, in which the Chinese participants will compete with counterparts from seven countries including Russia; the PLA JLSF was involved, a first since its 2016 formation.
- “Elbrus Ring”: held in Mount Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe; includes a comprehensive field skills competition in high mountains with a total distance of about 116 kilometers from the elevation of 2,356 meters to 5,642 meters, making it feature the longest time span, the most subjects, the highest requirements on physical capability and the worst competition environment among all the events in IAG; the competition began on August 22 in Russia, and lasted 13 days; participants from various countries complete tasks in 15 areas including cliff climbing and group shooting. Nine countries including China and Russia participated; all 20 PLA participants, who trained for five months, came from the Tibet Military Command, which has participated in this even three previous times.
- “Army of Culture”: in Moscow; is a competition involving professional performers, creative groups and representatives of military museums and cultural centers from participating IAG 2021 countries. The competition aims to deepen ties between the people and the armed forces of the participating countries, popularize military songs, and provide participants with the opportunity to display their creative potential and become familiar with the cultural essence of other countries. A total of 16 countries including China, Russia and Kazakhstan participated in the competition.

The IAG 2022, which took place from August 13 to 27, included 36 competitions co-hosted by 12 countries, including China, Russia and Iran, attracting 275 military teams from 37 countries (regions) ([CMO](#), [August 16](#); [August 13](#); [July 26](#)). The competitions hosted by China were held in two locations. The PLA Army (PLAA) hosted “Suvorov Onslaught”, a contest among infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) crews, and the “Safe Route”, a minesweeping contest among engineering troops, in Korla. The PLAN hosted “Sea Cup” contest among naval surface ships in Qingdao, which involved the guided-missile frigate *Handan* and the Russian Navy’s Pacific Fleet’s corvette *Gromkiy*. Teams from Russia, Belarus, Iran and Venezuela participated in these contests in China. As for the events held abroad, the PLA dispatched nine teams to Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Algeria and Uzbekistan to participate in nine contests hosted by the five countries respectively. At the invitation of the Venezuelan military, the PLA also sent a delegation to observe the Sniper Frontier competition there.

Non-traditional Security Operations

Non-traditional security operations include a wide variety of military activities that assist foreign partners or provide public goods to the international community. These include non-combatant evacuations; UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO); humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) efforts and anti-piracy operations. The PLA undertakes activities in each of these categories.

Although most peacekeeping focuses on Africa, the Peacekeeping Affairs Center under China's MND hosted the first China-Latin America peacekeeping webinar in Beijing from July 28-29, 2021 ([MND](#), August 2, 2021). The stated goal of this event was to implement the vision of building a community of shared future for mankind proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, promote the pragmatic cooperation between the Chinese and Latin American militaries, share peacekeeping experience and uphold multilateralism. UN Assistant Secretary-General Alexandre Zouev attended the opening ceremony online. More than 50 officials and experts from China and the main Latin-America troop- and police-contributing countries for UN peacekeeping operations, participated in the webinar.

Immediately following a volcano and tsunami in Tonga this January, the PLAAF sent two transport aircraft and the PLAN sent the Southern Theater Command Navy's amphibious dock landing ship *Wuzhishan* to deliver relief supplies, including more than 550 tons of fresh water as well as food, water purifiers, tents, prefab houses, tractors, and radio communication equipment ([China Brief](#), February 25; [CMO](#), February 22).

Over ten days in late July, the PLA's Logistic Support Department and Laos' General Logistics Department held the annual bilateral "PeaceTrain-2022" joint humanitarian medical rescue exercise and medical service activities in Laos' capital Vientiane and the adjacent town of Phonhong ([CMO](#), July 29). The PLA "Peace Train" medical team, which traveled and operated from a train, has been working closely with the Lao People's Army's medical and logistics units, highlighting the "four joints" of joint command and control, joint treatment of the wounded, joint epidemic prevention and control, and joint evacuation of the wounded, during the medical rescue exercise. The PLA team also provided nucleic acid testing equipment and other epidemic prevention materials to the Lao People's Army.

"Cobra Gold", which is perhaps the most influential multinational joint military exercise in Southeast Asia, is held annually in Thailand ([CMO](#), August 3, 2021). China started to join the "Cobra Gold" exercise as an observer in 2002 and assigned an actual military squad to participate for the first time in 2014. Due to COVID restrictions, the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief field training exercise (HADR FTX) component of Cobra Gold 2021 exercise was held in Kunming, Yunnan Province from July 30 to August 2 via video link. During the video forum, 13 experts from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), and other professional institutions, conducted in-depth exchanges on "civil-military coordination in humanitarian relief operations" and "establishment of multinational coordination centers," etc. in the context of coping with flood and earthquake relief. The Cobra Gold 2022 Table Top Exercise (TTX) was held in Thailand from February 18-22 ([CMO](#), March 2). Due to the pandemic, the Chinese military has participated in the exercise via video conference since 2021.

Concerning medical-related exercises, one example involved the seven-day China-Vietnam "Peace Rescue 2021" joint medical exercise in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in December 2021, which was managed by the CMC's Logistic Support Department and the Vietnam People's Army ([CMO](#), December 13, 2021). The exercise focused on humanitarian medical rescue issues and completed trainings on subjects including joint military health service command, joint on-site rescue, and treatment of wounded personnel in accordance with real combat standards.

Concerning peacekeeping, in September 2021, the PLA conducted a multinational peacekeeping live exercise (Shared Destiny-2021) in Henan Province that included 1,000 officers and soldiers from countries including China, Mongolia, Pakistan and Thailand ([CMO](#), September 15, 2021). In addition, the MND's Peacekeeping Affairs Center hosted the first "Shared Vision" International Peacekeeping Forum via video link in Beijing from August 24 to 25 ([MND](#), August 30). With the theme of "Making the Vision of Peace Come True", the forum include three seminars: "UN Peacekeeping Operations: Prospects and Challenges", "Supporting UN Peacekeeping Operations: Capacity Building and Best Practices", and "Promoting UN Peacekeeping Partnership: Global Collaboration and Cooperation."

Finally, the *Peace Ark* hospital ship, which is subordinate to the Eastern Theater Command Navy (ETCN), has visited 43 countries, providing medical service to 230,000 people around the world since its commissioning in December 2008 (CMO, [April 4](#); [April 23, 2019](#)). It has carried out seven of the PLAN's "Harmonious Missions" worldwide as well as participating in the 2014 U.S.-led RIMPAC exercise; however, it appears that its last mission was in 2019 when it visited South America and stopped in Fiji while in transit.

International Academic Exchanges and Cooperation

The PLA National Defense University (NDU) is actively engaged in international exchanges and cooperation. [5] According to an official source in 2018, since 1985, the NDU has received over 1,300 foreign delegations, over 120,000 foreign military personnel, government officials and other experts from over 90 countries. The PLA NDU also has sent 400 delegations to visit over 30 countries. Over 900 NDU research and teaching staff have studied, lectured, participated in academic conferences overseas. The PLA NDU has contacts with over 140 foreign militaries, maintains regular interactions and cooperation with prominent military academic institutions in over ten countries. The PLA NDU has also signed formal inter-university exchange and cooperation memos with foreign military academic institutions, including the National Defense University of the United States (U.S. NDU).

According to an August 2018 *PLA Daily* article, in recent years, the PLA NDU has trained over 500 foreign military cadets from over 100 countries ([PLA Daily](#), August 2, 2018). Several dozen PLA NDU teaching and research officers have participated in international peacekeeping and served as military observers. Although the U.S. NDU had annual meetings with the PLA NDU in Washington, D.C. for several years, the last PLA delegations to visit were in April and May 2019 and the last U.S. NDU delegations to visit the PLA NDU were in July and November 2019. [6]

Since 2002, the NDU has held over 16 conferences on international security, which are aimed at strengthening academic exchange with the international military community. Unfortunately, no information was found concerning NDU engagements during 2021 or 2022; however, it most likely still has a robust program with multiple countries except the U.S.

In addition to the PLA NDU, the PLA Army Engineering University in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, has also hosted academic conferences. For example, in November 2021, the university hosted the three-day 8th International Army Cadets Week by video link, which included cadets from foreign military academies of 12 countries, namely Brazil, Cambodia, Egypt, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines, Romania, Serbia,

Singapore and Thailand, and more than ten Chinese military academies ([CMO](#), November 12, 2021). In addition, last December, the university hosted the 2nd International Army Forum on Military Education ([CMO](#), December 1, 2021). Representatives from ten foreign military academies and commanding organs of multiple countries including Brazil, Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Serbia, Singapore and South Africa conducted two-day exchange activities via video link. Based on the theme of “future development trend, challenges and countermeasures of the cultivation of Army primary officers,” the forum aimed to build an academic exchange platform for international Army academies, promote the international exchange and cooperation in military education, and accelerate academy reform and development.

Military Diplomacy with Africa and Latin America

The recent publication *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA* provides an outstanding overview of the PLA's military diplomacy around the world up to late 2020. [7] Some of the report's key takeaways for Africa and Latin America are reviewed below.

In addition to peacekeeping operations, the PLA has engaged in several different aspects of military diplomacy in Africa. [8] According to Paul Nantulya, the PLA's relationships with African countries began when it provided military skills and training in leadership and command to anticolonial and antiapartheid movements during African nations' struggles for independence. Looking at the overall pattern of China's military relations with Africa, he finds the vast majority of interactions have been senior officer and personnel exchanges, with only a small fraction consisting of exercises or port calls. In addition, significant numbers of African military personnel continue to be educated at China's institutions for professional military education. Although Africans view the strategic training offered by the U.S. and other Western militaries as superior, at the junior and middle levels, the PLA training model is considered excellent and more relevant to African needs in technical areas, such as information technology and computers, logistics, and military medicine. His article provides good information about the relationship by country.

In the same volume, R. Evan Ellis examines China's military and police engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean. [9] This engagement has expanded substantially over the past 25 years. Sales of military equipment, for instance, have moved from military clothing and nonlethal equipment to radar systems, fighter and transport aircraft, armored vehicles, and patrol ships with an increasingly broad set of partners. China's military engagement has included an eight-year presence in the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, multiple visits to the region by the PLAN hospital ship *Peace Ark*, regular port calls, participation of PLA forces in the region's elite military training schools, and the hosting of Latin American defense personnel in China for courses of increasing length and sophistication. He observes that China's security relationships with Latin American and Caribbean countries can be grouped into four categories: those with anti-US communist and populist regimes, those with “diversity-of-partner” regimes, those with strongly U.S.-aligned regimes, and those with regimes that do not diplomatically recognize the PRC. Anti-U.S. communist and populist regimes such as Cuba, Venezuela, and, previously, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador are the leading purchasers of arms from Chinese companies. These countries maintain strong institutional relationships with the PLA. So far, however, China has not openly sought to establish permanent military facilities in these countries or to conduct anti-U.S. military exercises. Diversity-of-partner regimes, such as Brazil, Peru, Uruguay, and many Caribbean nations, seek to maintain good military relations with China and the U.S. and other countries. Diversity-of-partner countries often

purchase or receive donations of Chinese-made military and police equipment and regularly send personnel to China for institutional visits and training and education. The countries in the region that do not diplomatically recognize the PRC do not conduct military exchanges with the PLA or acquire Chinese military equipment.

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

Notes

[1] Other countries included Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tunisia, Angola, Egypt, Morocco, Tanzania, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Cameroon, Rwanda, Argentina, Laos, Cambodia, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh. "Chinese PLA sends epidemic prevention supplies to militaries of 20 countries," CMO, June 5, 2020, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-06/05/content_9845235.htm.

[2] Of note, although the U.S. military uses the term "combined" for training with foreign militaries, the PLA uses the term "joint", which can also refer to two or more PLA services training together.

[3] For the history of the joint training, see Kenneth Allen, "[The PLA's Military Diplomacy Under COVID-19](#)," *China Brief*, June 21, 2021 ; Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, [Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications](#) (NDU Press, July 2017),

[4] April Herlevi and Christopher Cairns, "China's Activities in the Pacific Island Countries: Laying the Foundation for Future Access in Oceania," in Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen, Editors, [Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA](#), (Carlisle: PA, US Army War College Press, July 2022).

[5] The PLA National Defense University conducts extensive international military exchanges and cooperation" [国防大学 广泛开展国际军事交流合作], *People's Liberation Army Daily*, reprinted in *Xinhua*, 2 August, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-08/02/c_129924959.htm; "The second National Defense University International Defense Forum Held in Beijing" [第二届国防大学国际防务论坛在京开幕]. *Xinhua*, 20 June 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2019-06/20/c_1210165266.htm. For more detailed information, see Kenneth W. Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions*, Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020, at [2020-06-11 PLA Academic Institutions.pdf \(af.edu\)](#).

[6] Author's correspondence with Dr. Joel Wuthnow, senior research fellow, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, U.S. NDU.

[7] Roger Cliff and Roy D. Kamphausen, Editors, *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*, (Carlisle: PA, US Army War College Press, July 2022).

[8] Paul Nantulya, “‘Only with Deep Roots Can a Tree Yield Rich Fruit:’ The People’s Liberation Army in Africa,” in *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*.

[9] R. Evan Ellis, “Chinese Military and Police Engagement in Latin America,” in *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*

The Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis: What did the August PLA Exercises Around Taiwan Accomplish?

Ying Yu Lin



(Image: A control room on a ship during the PLA exercises around Taiwan in early August, source: 81.cn)

Introduction

As the Russia-Ukrainian War rages on, a “crisis” of a similar vein unexpectedly erupted in the Taiwan Strait this summer. Some observers attributed the escalation of tension to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s recent visit to Taipei, which subsequently ignited a war of words between leaders in Beijing and Washington (81.cn, August 4). As a matter of fact, the moment Pelosi arrived in Taipei, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) announced its decision to hold live-fire drills in six designated areas in the waters around Taiwan (Xinhuanet, August 2)

How could the PLA organize such massive drills on such short notice? Put another way, with or without Pelosi’s visit to Taipei, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) might have already planned to hold large-scale military drills around Taiwan prior to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which is scheduled to begin on October 16 (China Brief, September 20). Beijing appears to have used the Pelosi visit as a pretext for the show of military force that followed. On China’s part, the best way to achieve the separate goals of intimidating Taiwan, making its bottom line fully known to the U.S., and expanding its internal power at once in the lead-up to the 20th National Congress of the CPC (hereafter referred to as the 20th Party Congress) is through military actions of various sorts. There is a compelling reason to do so.

Nearly seven years into the across-the-board military reforms launched in late 2015 by President and Central Military Commission Chairman (CMC) Xi Jinping, the PLA needs to prove that it has become a more joint and combat-capable force. All these considerations might be the reasons behind Beijing's recent launch of military drills around Taiwan in a move intended to demonstrate determination to solve the Taiwan issue once and for all ahead of the 20th Party Congress.

Notably, Pelosi's visit to Taipei is not unprecedented, as then House Speaker Newt Gingrich visited Taiwan in 1997 ([Office of the President, Taiwan](#), March 2, 1997). However, judging from the exercise zones announced by the PRC in response to the Pelosi visit, Beijing has demonstrated an obvious intention to break the long-standing tacit agreement between China, Taiwan, and the U.S. regarding certain red lines not to be crossed by all three parties. China's intention is to demonstrate to the other parties that the PLA is now capable of projecting force beyond Taiwan to the Pacific and the waters off Taiwan's east coast. Such a capability can even serve the purpose of blockading Taiwan. As the PLA's ability to target Taiwan improves, Xi may well have more bargain chips at his disposal in engaging the U.S. diplomatically during his would-be third term in office.

The Significance of New Military Exercise Zones

No sooner had Pelosi's flight landed in Taiwan than China's state-run media announced six areas marked off for military drills. Nevertheless, from the demarcation of the exercise zones to the kick-off of the exercises, the PRC had been preparing for the campaign of media warfare that followed ([81.cn](#), August 4). Of the six exercise zones, those in the waters to the south and northeast of Taiwan, respectively, were supposedly for no other purpose than to simulate cutting off shipping traffic to and from Taiwan. Meanwhile, the western drill zone, which was close to the median line of the Taiwan Strait, played a role in assisting the PLA in launching ballistic missiles toward the two zones mentioned above, an action that fell within expectations.

In addition, the PLA fired long-range artillery rockets into the drill zone in the Taiwan Strait, using live ammunition. Forces at sea and in the air were employed at the same time to simulate a push across the median line of the Taiwan Strait into Taiwan's side of the waterway. As for the drill zone east of Taiwan, the PLA use this area to practice preparations for strikes against certain strategic targets that it has always guarded against. These targets are apparently U.S. forces or those of its allies, which might intervene in an armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait ([81.cn](#), August 5). The eastern exercise zone also indicates that the Western Pacific Region is now within the PLA's striking range.

The activities of the PLA Navy (PLAN) and Air Force (PLAAF) in the waters east of Taiwan underscore that the PLA is now capable of attacking Taiwan from the east, as well as from the west across the Taiwan Strait. If PLA ships and planes appear in numbers off the eastern coast, Taiwan will end up encircled on all sides, which would enable the PLA to impose a maritime and possibly an aerial blockade of the island. Chinese strategists are well aware of Taiwan's reliance on sea traffic for energy imports and recognize that a sea and air blockade would put Taiwan in a predicament that is not easily surmountable ([81.cn](#), August 5).

Dongfeng Missiles as a Means of Intimidation

The PLA exercises kicked off on August 4 with the firing of multiple Dongfeng-series ballistic missiles into the waters off Taiwan. As reported by the Taiwanese media, a total of eleven ballistic missiles of different types, including the Dong Feng-11 (DF-11), DF-15, and DF-16 were fired toward their target areas. According to animated news videos released by China's state-run media, the total number of missiles fired was 16. The 16-missile count as claimed by China's media did not match observations made by the media in Taiwan and Japan ([HK01](#), August 5). The most possible explanation is that the animated news content as made public by China's media was made before the release of news reports on the missile launch and that as the animation was being made, the number of missiles to be fired was known to be sixteen in all. However, some glitches or other issues might have occurred during the firings of the missiles by the PLA Rocket Force, which prevented some of the missiles from being launched.

Disinformation Campaigns and Cyber Attacks

Along with the military exercises, China also launched disinformation campaigns to disseminate large amounts of false and true information mixed together so as to form a new type of threat known as "real and fake moves made at the same time." From the moment Pelosi arrived in Taiwan, disinformation spread online promoting rumors intended to undermine public trust in Taiwanese authorities. For example, one rumor that spread online claimed that "Taoyuan International Airport has sustained damages in missile attacks from China." ([Taiwan News](#), August 8) Disinformation of the kind showed up on major social media platforms and apps, while some popular convenience stores were subjected to cyber-attacks, in which their in-store screens displayed messages unfriendly to the U.S. Some Critical Infrastructure also suffered similar attacks ([IBT](#), August 4). As the Chinese military exercises unfolded around Taiwan, word spread that major government websites had been hacked. It no doubt could be taken as a signal to Taiwan that in crisis, the island's information security would be compromised beyond remedy. The goal is to drive the people of Taiwan to panic about uncertainties arising from disinformation campaigns launched by the enemy lurking in the shadows.

Meanwhile, China also posted photos on social media platforms to drive home the message that its warships had approached Taiwan's territorial waters. Such disinformation, though shocking at first, was debunked shortly afterwards by Taiwan's military and civilian observers or commentators on the basis of specialized knowledge. For instance, one of the most circulated images was of a PLA soldier looking through binoculars toward an object in the background, presumed to be a power plant in Hualie, Taiwan, which was reminiscent of a similar image that went viral just a year ago. The image showed the captain of a U.S. naval ship sitting on the deck of his ship, resting his feet on the handrail. He was watching China's aircraft carrier, Liaoning, which was not far away. He was accompanied by his deputy, who stood next to him. The highly persuasive effects of the photo might be what the PLA tried to achieve through posting a tell-tale image of a similar nature. The image made public by the PLA of the ship and the soldier holding the binoculars was supposed to convey the impression that Chinese warships were close enough to Taiwan's coast to be able to make effective approaches to the island and target critical infrastructure such as power facilities. Based on the soldier's uniform, the interaction of light and shadow and the shape of the waves, the doctored image was most likely created by combining elements from three different photos ([Taiwan News](#), August 10). Although it does not involve actual kinetic combat, propaganda warfare of this kind is significant and is part of broader efforts by the PRC to wage cognitive warfare against Taiwan.

Conclusion

The second major crisis in the Taiwan Strait in the last three vividly demonstrates that the concept of “asymmetrical warfare,” which has become a guiding principle for Taiwan’s military, is best applied as a framework to identify strategic directions rather than dictate equipment requirements and efforts to develop new capabilities. As a service most involved in international affairs, the PLA navy exerts influence by resorting to gunboat diplomacy or slowing the flag. In such situations as the recent standoff between Chinese and Taiwan warships in the Taiwan Strait, smaller-sized ships are less suitable for deployment since they cannot sail long distances and are less able than large vessels to spend extended periods at sea ([Taipei Times](#), August 11). Moreover, Taiwan’s military development policy is not entirely directed toward a final showdown with the PRC, but also geared toward maintaining sea control and ensuring the safety of sea traffic in the region.

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China's Interests in Afghanistan: One Year After the U.S. Withdrawal

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai



(Image: Foreign Minister Wang Yi speaks at a foreign ministers' meeting between China, Afghanistan and Pakistan on March 30, source: FMPRC)

Introduction

In late June, a severe earthquake struck southeastern Afghanistan. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced it would provide 50 million RMB (\$7.2 million) in emergency aid, including tents, blankets, cots and other sorely needed supplies to the impacted areas ([People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) (FMPRC), June 25). Beijing invests in Afghanistan to further its long-term economic, strategic and political interests. Since the U.S. withdrawal last year, China has had an opportunity to advance its interests and deepen its clout in Afghanistan. When Kabul fell, China did not condemn the move and announced that it respected the choice of the Afghan people—a sign of goodwill from Beijing to the Taliban that it subscribes to the narrative that the new government has the full support of the population ([Xinhua](#), August 16, 2021).

China has never been militarily involved in Afghanistan. Uyghur militants have found safe-haven in the country for decades, but the level of threat they pose to the PRC is debated even among Chinese analysts ([China Brief](#), February 11). Despite such long-running concerns, Beijing was unperturbed by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan last year. The PRC kept its embassy open through the fall of Kabul, and Beijing has

sustained extensive diplomatic contact with the Taliban leadership to safeguard its security, economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan ([Global Times](#), August 17, 2021). In fact, the PRC is seeking to carry out a complex balancing act in Afghanistan. Concerns about Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for extremist groups that could target neighboring states persist, but Beijing also perceives huge opportunities in Afghanistan's natural resources, markets and potential to serve as a key node linking western China with South and Central Asia. In order to achieve a stable and secure Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which will advance China's interests throughout Central Asia, Beijing needs a stable Afghanistan.

China and Post-9/11 Afghanistan

The basis of PRC policy toward Afghanistan are the five principles of peaceful coexistence: non-intervention, peaceful co-existence, mutual non-aggression, respect for sovereignty, equality and mutual benefit ([FMPRC](#), July 1, 2014). Moreover, China has economic, security, and strategic equities in Afghanistan, which provide a basis for its involvement in the country. China-Afghanistan relations have generally remained smooth throughout their diplomatic history, except from 1979-1989, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and China refused to recognize the Soviet-installed government. Similarly, Beijing did not recognize the Taliban government from 1996-2001. [1]

Following the September 11 attacks, the U.S. proposed a resolution in the UN Security Council for military action targeting Afghanistan. China favored the resolution, which allowed Washington to move forward with its military campaign. In Beijing's view, the U.S. toppling the Taliban was beneficial from a security perspective, as under the Taliban, Afghanistan had become a hub for militants, including substantial numbers of Uyghurs from China's western Xinjiang region. However, from a geopolitical perspective, an entrenched U.S. security presence on China's western flank was not in the interests of Beijing, which had established good relations with the Taliban. In order to support the peace process in Afghanistan, China hosted several Taliban delegations ([Xinhua](#), July 28, 2021; [South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), June 20, 2019). Moreover, China never used the term "Taliban" while denouncing terrorism and militant activities in Afghanistan. China did not condemn the capture of Kabul and looked instead to continue a smooth relationship with the Taliban. For their part, Taliban leaders have repeatedly made assurances to Beijing not to allow their territory to be used to harm China or its interests ([FMPRC](#), March 25; [Guancha](#), July 28, 2021).

Economic Incentives

Afghanistan is an underdeveloped country with vast natural resources, in particular, lithium, cobalt, copper, gold, natural gas, coal, and oil. The country has 16 trillion cubic feet of gas, 500 billion barrels of liquified natural gas, and 1.6 trillion barrels of crude oil, per the U.S. Geological Survey ([IOP](#), 2020). The total estimated value of Afghanistan's natural resources is \$1 trillion, which was a source of attraction for China after the U.S.'s exit ([The Times of India](#), August 25, 2021). Due to its growing domestic energy demand and tight global supplies since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, China is concerned about both energy security and access, and wants to explore new options in addition to producing clean energy ([China Daily](#), August 15). Similarly, Afghanistan is a market for the export of Chinese goods, which further encourages Beijing to remain engaged with the country.

Moreover, given Afghanistan's geographic location along the BRI, it is a vital state for China's efforts to develop both Central Asia and its Western territory. As a result, Chinese efforts in the Afghan peace process aimed to foster stability in Afghanistan, which would ultimately serve China's economic and strategic interests. In a meeting with his counterparts from Afghanistan and Pakistan, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "we will jointly build the Belt and Road Initiative, extend the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan, and help Afghanistan participate in regional connectivity" ([Global Times](#), March 31). However, the bigger question is: will the Taliban be able to provide sufficient security to protect Chinese projects and encourage further investment? In addition to facing international isolation, the Taliban government in Kabul is struggling with a feeble economy. In dire straits, the Taliban cannot be picky when it comes to foreign economic and political support. However, the Taliban regime has high expectations for China, which is primarily due to its strategic rivalry with the U.S. Moreover, Beijing is seeking to pave the way for Afghanistan's inclusion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is often termed the BRI's flagship mega-project. During Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Afghanistan in late July, he expressed the PRC's desire to extend the CPEC to Afghanistan ([Li Bijian, Twitter](#), July 29). Nevertheless, Beijing has still displayed a degree of caution in handling the Taliban government and has refrained from providing any economic aid to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The PRC has not been forthcoming with aid, but Beijing has still sought to economically bolster the Taliban in other ways. For example, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Foreign Ministers' meeting in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the PRC announced a tariff waiver on 98 percent of Afghan goods ([FMPRC](#) July 29). The PRC statement further read: "China hopes to push the alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the development strategies of Afghanistan, support the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan, and share China's development opportunities." China also resumed the issuance of visas to Afghan nationals ([Khama Press](#), July 30).

China's Security interests in Afghanistan

China has been cautious toward Afghanistan due to concerns that insecurity there could spill over into Xinjiang, which has a large ethnic minority Muslim population that has been subject to increasing state control and repression over the past decade ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), April 29, 2021). One of the reasons that China supported the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which began in late 2001, was the activities of militant groups there that threatened China's security. The U.S. operations and presence in Afghanistan were favorable as this diminished several security threats to the regional countries, including China. At the same time, however, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan was a potential threat to China and its interests in Afghanistan. According to Andrew Small, an expert on China's involvement in South Central Asia at the German Marshall Fund, "The U.S. presence was understood as a geopolitical threat, much like the Soviet military presence in the 1980s, but Beijing had grown to see it as the lesser of two evils." [2] Hence, the U.S. presence had both merits and drawbacks for China.

Likewise, Beijing is worried about the terrorist spillover into neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, its "all-weather friend" and strategic partner. China has hugely invested in CPEC as a core component of the BRI. However, the Baloch insurgency and the activities of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) pose a serious threat to CPEC projects as well as Chinese nationals ([China Brief](#), July 15). The threat from the Baloch militants intensified this April when a female suicide bomber staged an attack on the Confucius Institute in Karachi, which represented

a dramatic shift in the tactics of the Baloch insurgency ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 20). For Beijing, the threat to CPEC underscores that its interests entail more than protecting its territory; it also drives home that the PRC has a strong interest in promoting regional security to safeguard its investments, workers and partners. The rise of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the Afghanistan-Pakistan regions are severe concerns for China. [3]

In an effort to mitigate the regional security challenges it faces, Beijing has been constantly engaged with the Taliban since the group established a political office in Doha, Qatar in 2013. A month after the Taliban captured Kabul, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting was held in mid-September 2021, wherein Chinese president Xi Jinping reiterated: "We need to follow the journey of upholding our common security. We need to pursue common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, and take tough actions against the "three forces" of terrorism, separatism and extremism, including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement" ([FMPRC](#) September 17, 2021). Beijing wants to promote a more moderate Taliban in Kabul who can run the country effectively and extricate Afghanistan from its economic crisis through engagement with the outside world. However, promoting a functioning government in Kabul is also motivated by China's desire to hold the Taliban to its promise not to allow Afghan soil to be used by terrorist and extremist groups. China is reportedly providing drones to the Taliban in order to strengthen their capacity to neutralize their opponents. The risk for China is that the still comparatively radical Taliban will not be able to stabilize Afghanistan politically nor integrate it economically with the world. The Taliban remains a pariah in the west due to its negligence of human rights, including girls' education and providing safe havens to al-Qaeda, as demonstrated by the U.S. strike in downtown Kabul that killed al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri in late July ([SCMP](#), August 2).

China's Broader Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

China's engagement with Afghanistan in general, and the Taliban in particular, has intensified over the last decade. China has long promoted economic development as the cornerstone of achieving a peaceful, stable Afghanistan, but its strategic interests in the country cannot be overlooked. China's strategic interests in Afghanistan are to forestall the country from becoming an arena of geopolitical competition; prevent Afghanistan from falling back into the orbit of the West; and promote stability to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for extremist groups.

In the long run, China has adopted a diplomatic and developmental posture to secure its strategic interests in Afghanistan. In 2014, China appointed Sun Yuxi as its special envoy for Afghanistan in an effort "to step up the communication with Afghanistan and all parties concerned and safeguard lasting peace, stability and development of Afghanistan and the region." [4] In October 2014, China hosted the Heart of Asia Conference, a forum to discuss regional issues, especially Afghanistan ([FMPRC](#), July 14, 2014). During the conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed talks among various factions in Afghanistan that could help resolve differences among them. At least in part, China sought to reduce the level of insecurity in Afghanistan so that there was no further justification for the U.S. to remain. Beijing's frequent hosting of Taliban delegations and support for the Afghan peace process were a part of this strategy to get the U.S. out of Afghanistan. On the other hand, China's economic aid and investments aim to strengthen its foothold in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, due to its strategic location, Afghanistan has great importance in China's strategic calculus. Afghanistan is key to China's Belt and Road Initiative because it lies at the crossroads of three regions: South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East ([China Brief](#), August 17, 2021). Beijing recognizes that its long-term strategic objectives cannot be met unless Afghanistan is stable and peaceful, with an emphasis on economic development. Unlike the West, China has not thrown its weight behind democracy in Afghanistan but does share the international community's interest in achieving a stable Afghanistan. Beijing recognizes that Afghan society is multi-ethnic, and as a result, an inclusive government with broad support from different ethnic groups is a condition of stability ([China Daily](#), August 18, 2021).

Conclusion

China's post-9/11 interest in Afghanistan has intensified since the U.S. departure last year. Much of this interest stems from Beijing's desire that Afghanistan achieve peace and stability so that it ceases to be a hub for terrorist and militant groups. For its part, the Taliban government has high expectations that China can provide sorely needed economic aid and political support. Moreover, the Taliban expect China to extend diplomatic recognition. Despite the close engagement between the Taliban and China over the last decade, whether such a move is forthcoming is uncertain.

The efforts by China to promote peace over the last decade demonstrate that Beijing understands that a peaceful and stable Afghanistan is integral to its broader political, economic, and strategic interests. [5] However, the current situation in Afghanistan confronts China with both opportunities and challenges, and whether Beijing can succeed, particularly over the long term, in transforming Afghanistan into a peaceful, stable waystation on the Belt and Road, remains to be seen.

Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai is the author of The Troubled Triangle: US-Pakistan Relations under the Taliban's Shadow (Routledge, 2021).

Notes

[1] Richard Weitz, "The Limits of Partnership: China, NATO and the Afghan War," [China Security](#) Vol. 6 No. 1, 2010.

[2] Andrew Small in a discussion, "After the Withdrawal: China's interests in Afghanistan," The European Council on Foreign Relations, August 5, 2021.

[3] Author interview with Rachael Rudolph, Assistant Professor, Beijing Institute of Technology, Beijing, China.

[4] Zhao Huasheng, "Afghanistan and China's new neighborhood diplomacy," [International Affairs](#), Volume 92, Issue 4, July 2016, Pages 891–908,.

[5] Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai, [The Troubled triangle: US-Pakistan Relations under the Taliban's Shadow](#), (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 140.