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“Yan’an Spirit”: The Rise of Xi’s Lieutenants

John S. Van Oudenaren

Days after his dominant showing at the 20th Party Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping led the newly appointed Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) on a visit to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) base of operations in the War with Japan and the Chinese Civil War in Yan’an, Shaanxi, ([Xinhuanet](#), October 27). A key theme of the visit was that the CCP’s achievement of political unity in the Yan’an era (1935-1948) enabled it to overcome much stronger foes. The leadership toured the site where the Seventh Party Congress was held in mid-1945 following the “Yan’an Rectification Movement” in which Mao consolidated control of the Party and established Mao Zedong Thought as dogma. The first excursion of a new PBSC is significant as it highlights the leadership’s areas of emphasis for the coming half-decade. Xi opted to visit Yan’an after a Party Congress in which he disregarded many long-held norms concerning leadership turnover in order to stack the Politburo with allies and protégés ([China Brief](#), October 24). In Yan’an, Xi declared: “I have come here to manifest that

the new central leadership will inherit and carry forward the glorious traditions and fine work styles of the Party cultivated during the Yan'an Period, and carry forward the Yan'an Spirit.” He defined the Yan'an Spirit as “adhering to the firm and correct political direction, emancipating the mind and seeking truth from facts, observing the principle of serving the people wholeheartedly, and practicing self-reliance and hard work” ([People's Daily](#), October 28). In identifying the new leadership with the “Yan'an spirit,” Xi is framing his recent consolidation of power as motivated not by self-interest, but by the imperative to unite the Party in challenging times.



(Image: The 20th Politburo Standing Committee at the Yan'an Revolutionary Memorial Hall, from left to right, Zhao Leji, Wang Huning, Cai Qi, Xi Jinping, Li Xi, Ding Xuexiang, Li Qiang, source: Xinhua)

The visit was also a homecoming of sorts for Xi, who reminisced about the seven years that he spent in rural Shaanxi as a “sent down youth” during the Cultural Revolution. Yan’an occupies a special place in Xi’s carefully crafted persona as the “People’s Leader” (人民领袖, *renmin lingxiu*) ([Xinhuashe](#), April 10). According to the official narrative, rural life forged Xi into a genuine servant of the people, who developed an unshakeable bond with the masses by living among them ([CCTV](#), July 11, 2018). In a 2012 interview, Xi said that “when I came to the Yellow Land at 15, I was lost and hesitant, but when I left at 22, I had a firm mission and was full of confidence” ([Xinhuanet](#), February 14, 2015).

The Death of Collective Leadership

The 20th Party Congress effectively obliterated the collective leadership model that defined elite politics in China in the post-Mao era. The conditions that sustained this model, absence of a personality cult around the top leader and a modicum of factional balance in the top leadership, no longer exist. Deng Xiaoping, a Cultural Revolution survivor, believed that "China's future depends on collective leadership" to forestall the return of a Mao-style, personalistic dictatorship ([Qiushiwang](#), July 31, 2019). The final demise of collective leadership was epitomized by the humiliating removal of former General Secretary Hu Jintao from the Great Hall of the People on the final day of the Party Congress ([CNA](#), October 24).

Debate has ensued over the cause of Hu's indecorous ejection. Regardless, Hu was assuredly in an ill-temper on the final day of the Party Congress. His political marginalization was about to be made public with the announcement of the new 205-member Central Committee, which indicated that Xi is no longer bound by the unwritten "rules" that previously informed Politburo appointments and retirements ([Xinhua](#), October 22). The new Central Committee lineup omitted two PBSC incumbents, Premier Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, which indicated both long-time Hu protégés, would step down a year before reaching the conventionally observed retirement age of 68. In fact, Xi largely ignored the unspoken "(6)7 up, (6) 8" (*qishang baxia*) retirement norm to keep allies and promote protégés to the Politburo, while nudging his rivals into early retirement ([China Times](#), October 19, 2017). This was further underscored when Xi's long-time ally, General Zhang Youxia was kept on the Politburo and the Central Military Commission at age 72 ([Xinhua Daily Telegraph](#), October 24). Current Foreign Minister Wang Yi, a lead architect of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, was promoted to the Politburo at age 69, and will likely assume the top foreign policy role from Yang Jiechi ([China Brief](#), October 4). Meanwhile, Vice Premier Hu Chunhua, another Hu Jintao protégé, who was long considered a leading candidate for the Premiership and a shoo-in for the PBSC, did not even retain his Politburo seat.

Allies and Protégés

With Xi's factional rivals sidelined, the Politburo can be divided into two groups: protégés and allies. Protégés owe their elevation to the PBSC entirely to their relationships with Xi. On the contrary, allies, such as ideology chief Wang Huning and CMC Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia, supported Xi's rise and consolidation of power, but do not derive their status entirely from their relationship with the core leader. For example, both Wang Huning and Zhang Youxia were on the Central Committee before Xi became General Secretary, and Zhang joined the CMC at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, when Xi assumed chairmanship of the supreme military body ([Beijing Review](#), October 21, 2007).

Allies

Unlike his fellow 67-year-old colleagues, ideology czar Wang Huning sidestepped early retirement to retain his PBSC seat. He is likely to become Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the top United Front Work body. It is commonplace for leading scholars in China to advise on policy, but a career academic reaching the top leadership is an anomaly ([Xinhuanet](#), October 25). The former Fudan University Professor, who was coaxed into politics by Jiang Zemin, has played a major role in shaping all three post-Deng leaders' contributions to Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents"; Hu Jintao's "Scientific Outlook on Development" and Xi Jinping Thought. Although Wang has relationships with

both Jiang and Hu, his unique path to the Politburo renders him an unlikely potential rival to Xi. Unlike most of the other PBSC members, he has never led a province or a ministry, and as a result, he lacks the regional and/or bureaucratic power base necessary to build his own faction. [1]

Xi managed to keep another major ally on the Politburo, disregarding retirement conventions to promote his childhood friend, General Zhang Youxia to the senior Vice Chairman position on the CMC. A unique figure in the PLA, the 72-year old Zhang has been a driving force in implementing Xi's post-2015 military reforms. As the head of the CMC's Equipment Development Department (previously the General Armaments Department) during Xi's first term, he was instrumental in developing civil-military fusion, which seeks to leverage the PRC's civilian economy to develop advanced military and dual-use technology ([Xinhuanet](#), October 25). Zhang is one of the few PLA officers with direct combat experience, commanding a company during the 1980s China-Vietnam border war, which included participating in the largest border clash of that conflict, the Battle of Laoshan ([Netease](#), October 11; [The Paper](#), March 3, 2016). A life-long soldier, Zhang is clearly committed to the professionalization of the PLA so that it can carry out complex joint warfighting operations with the same acumen as the U.S. military.

Protégés

Xi promoted four protégés, Li Qiang, Cai Qi, Ding Xuexiang and Li Xi to replace the PBSC seats vacated by the early retirements of Li Keqiang and Wang Yang, as well as the expected departures of Li Zhanshu and Han Zheng. When the new PBSC was introduced, Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang followed Xi in the official order, which suggests he will succeed Li Keqiang as Premier. In elevating Li Qiang to the number two position, Xi opened another long-held precedent, which is for any would-be Premier to have experience serving as a Vice Premier on the State Council. Li, who was Xi's chief of staff in Zhejiang from 2004-2007, oversaw the mass lockdowns in Shanghai earlier this year ([Xinhuanet](#), October 25). Although the lockdown generated widespread popular frustration, Li's dogged implementation of zero-COVID likely strengthened his standing with Xi ([China Brief](#), April 8).

The promotion of Beijing Party Secretary Cai Qi to the PBSC to head the CCP Secretariat, the little known but instrumental body responsible for coordinating the Politburo's daily affairs, surprised many observers as well. However, Cai benefited from his decades of experience working with Xi going back to their time in Fujian in the 1980s and 1990s ([Xinhuanet](#), October 25). He also recently further demonstrated his value to Xi in running the politically sensitive Beijing municipality during the pandemic and the 2022 Winter Olympics

Xi also elevated his long-time aide Ding Xuexiang to the PBSC. In his capacity as Director of the CCP General Office, Ding developed a reputation as Xi's "alter ego" for accompanying the top leader almost everywhere he went. In that role, Xi entrusted Ding with minding the top leadership, assigning "drivers, secretaries and security details to most of the Politburo members and party elders," as well as "maintaining a surveillance system over both civilian and military leaders, which includes phone-tapping and close monitoring of their out-of-office activities" ([China Brief](#), May 27). It was Ding's Deputy, Kong Shaoxun, who removed a flustered Hu Jintao from the closing ceremony of the 20th Party Congress ([Dake Kang Twitter](#), October 22).

The final protégé, to make the PBSC is Guangdong Party Secretary Li Xi, who has close family ties to Xi (People.cn, October 25). Li has already been confirmed as Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) Standing Committee. Placing a loyal follower atop the party's top internal discipline organ supports Xi's efforts to maintain tight internal control. In his first speech, Li Xi stressed the need for the CCDI to implement the spirit of the 20th Party Congress through strict governance and rigorous intra-party supervision (Xinhuanet, October 26).

Conclusion

Xi's success in stacking the Politburo with allies and protégés, aligns the Party leadership with his overall dominance of political life in China, including the de facto cult of personality that now surrounds the "People's Leader" (Xhby.net, October 14). Political dominance may enable Xi to temporarily paper over some of the present difficulties now facing the PRC, but it will not obviate indefinitely the array of daunting challenges facing Beijing. The new leadership must resuscitate the economy even as it sustains a "dynamic zero-COVID" policy, which has limited pandemic deaths but has also been a major drag on growth. Simultaneously, the PRC is seeking to strengthen overall national security and attain greater financial, technological and resource self-sufficiency, in order to insulate itself from both economic and geopolitical shocks.

In his Party Congress work report, Xi referenced the need to surmount "drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China"—a reference to the challenge posed by intensifying rivalry with the United States and its allies (Gov.cn, October 25). Hence, the overall picture of Xi at Yan'an is of a leader surrounding himself with loyal lieutenants as he prepares for the great struggles to come in the quest to achieve "national reunification" and the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

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Notes

[1] For a detailed analysis of Wang Huning's retention on the PBSC and its implications for Taiwan, see, John Dotson, "[The Promotion of Wang Huning and the Prospects for an Increasingly Ideological CCP Taiwan Policy](#)," *Global Taiwan Brief*, November 2, 2022.

The 20th Party Congress: Xi Jinping Exerts Overwhelming Control Over Personnel, but Offers No Clues on Reviving the Economy

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Xi and the other members of the PBSC in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

General Secretary Xi Jinping has scored an overwhelming victory at the recently concluded 20th Party Congress and the First Plenum of the new Central Committee. Xi's picks for the Politburo and its Standing Committee consist of unalloyed supporters, but these officials are also largely apparatchiks with expertise in areas such as ideology, propaganda and "party construction," with a near-total absence of pragmatically minded technocrats experienced in finance and economics among them. As a result, most of Xi's conservative, quasi-Maoist policies, including the zero-COVID policy, appear set to endure into the foreseeable future.

A Clean Sweep for the Xi Jinping Faction

In the new Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC)—the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) inner sanctum of power—Xi remains General Secretary and Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC). The other six PBSC members are considered members of the Xi Jinping Faction (XJPF). Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang (李强), who worked under Xi in Zhejiang Province from 2002 to 2007, will become premier. Other Xi allies in the supreme decision-making body include incumbent PBSC members: Secretary of the Central

Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) Zhao Leji (赵乐际), who will become Chairman of the National People's Congress; and chief ideologue Wang Huning (王沪宁), who will become Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. In addition to Li Qiang, three other key Xi protégés earned promotions: Beijing Party Secretary Cai Qi (蔡奇), who likely become the new Head of the Central Committee Secretariat; Guangdong Party Secretary Li Xi (李希), who will become the next CCDI Secretary; and Director of the CCP General Office and Head of the Xi Jinping Office Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥), who will likely become executive vice premier ([Xinhuanet](#), October 23; [Ming Pao](#), October 23; [Nikkei Asia](#), October 23).

Among the 24 members of the incoming Politburo and the 205 full members of the new Central Committee, Xi loyalists also predominate ([Xinhua Weibo](#), October 23). The departure of thirteen ordinary (non-PBSC) Politburo members provided Xi with openings to elevate XJPF affiliates into the powerful body. As 133 (or 65 percent) of the 205 full Central Committee members are newly installed, Xi had leeway to eject members from known opposition groups or factions ([Xinhuanet](#), October 22). Almost all of the 24 seats on the new Politburo belong to bona fide XJPF members ([Radio Free Asia](#), October 23). Several Politburo seats are now held by members of the recently ascendant military-aerospace clique, a subset of the XJPF including the Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region Ma Xingrui (马兴瑞), who is a former General Manager of the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) and Director of the [China National Space Administration](#); Party Secretary of Liaoning Zhang Guoqing (张国清), who is a former vice-president of the [China North Industries Group Corporation](#); Zhejiang Party Secretary Yuan Jiajun (袁家军), a former top executive at the [CASC](#); and Shandong Party Secretary Li Ganjie (李干杰), a respected nuclear physicist ([South China Morning Post \(SCMP\)](#), October 23).

There are no representatives on the new Politburo from the two other former major factions within the CCP: the Communist Youth League Faction (CYLF) and the Shanghai Gang. Vice Premier Hu Chunhua (胡春华), a former Party Secretary of Guangdong and former First Secretary of the Communist Youth League, was generally expected to receive a seat on the PBSC and to serve as executive vice premier. However, Hu did not even make the ordinary Politburo, let alone the PBSC ([Zaobao.com](#), October 23; [United Daily News](#), October 23). This unusual phenomenon of only one party running the show “一党独大” (*yidangduda*) was apparently responsible for ex-General Secretary and CYLF leader Hu Jintao, who was sitting next to supreme leader Xi, being dragged unceremoniously about half-way through the closing ceremony of the 20th Party Congress on Saturday ([SCMP](#), October 22). The official Xinhua News Agency reported it was because Hu suddenly became sick. But the consensus among observers was that Hu was openly expressing his dissatisfaction at the name lists for the new Central Committee and the Politburo Standing Committee, which testified to the sidelining of his long-cherished faction. The kind of public display of dissent that Hu mounted has been a rarity in major party meetings since the Cultural Revolution ([Japan Times](#), October 23; [Hong Kong Free Press](#), October 22).

Xi's other major triumph is that the CCP Constitution has now been revised to incorporate the principle of the “two upholds” 两个维护 (*liang ge weihu*), which are to “uphold Comrade Xi Jinping's core position on the

Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole”; and to “uphold the Central Committee’s authority and its centralized, unified leadership” ([Gov.cn](#), October 26). This, of course, further confirms Xi’s Mao-like status. However, the new leadership has not explained why the long-rumored addition of the “two establishes” 两个确立 (*liang ge queli*), which are to establish Xi as the “core of the central party authorities and the core of the entire party” and to establish “Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” as the guiding principle for the party and state in the future, were not included in the updated constitution. Moreover, both in the run-up to and during the week-long Congress, various officials had already started referring to Xi as “the people’s leader,” 人民领袖 (*renmin lingxiu*), a title formerly used only for Mao Zedong that was also omitted in the revised charter. Nevertheless, these developments in no way detract from the supreme authority now exercised by Xi.

Chinese-style Modernization

A key element of Xi Jinping Thought is so-called “Chinese-style modernization”- 中国式现代化 (*zhongguoshi xiandaihua*), which Xi first raised during his opening report to the Party Congress on October 16 ([Xinhua](#), October 16). In effect, Chinese-style modernization means that only Marxist and socialist precepts that have been rendered suitable for Chinese conditions in the 21st century by supreme leader Xi will be followed in all policymaking. According to the definition laid down by Xi himself, “Chinese style modernization” is made up of elements such as stern party leadership; upholding Chinese-style socialist precepts; realizing “high-quality development”; enriching the “spiritual world” of the people; attaining common prosperity; seeking a balance between man and nature; and pushing forward global peace and the goal of a “common destiny for all mankind” ([VOA Chinese](#), October 20; [People’s Daily](#), October 19).

Although Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and open door policy” was mentioned four times in Xi’s Congress report, Xi has clearly prioritized national security and “waging struggles”- 斗争 (*douzheng*) against both domestic and foreign enemies ahead of economic development or opening up the country to the international marketplace. Future policy emphasis will be put on quasi-Maoist, autarkist values such as “internal circulation,” which means self-reliance, particularly in advanced sectors such as semiconductors and AI; party control of the economy, which includes keeping a tight grip on both public and private enterprises; advancing common prosperity; and preparing the people for a “complex and challenging global situation,” an apparent reference to meeting the challenge posed by the “anti-China” policies of the U.S. and its allies ([BBC Chinese](#), October 16).

In terms of foreign policy, the Xi team will continue to ratchet up nationalism, particularly in relation to China’s reunification of Taiwan and its resumption of “Middle Kingdom” status as a global rule-setter. Another priority of the post-20th Congress party is that by the year 2049, the centenary of the establishment of the PRC, China will have closed the gap with the U.S. and become the most powerful country in the world. The revised CCP Constitution pointed out for the first time that Beijing would “resolutely oppose and stop Taiwan independence.” In contrast, the old charter simply states that the CCP has a responsibility to achieve national reunification ([Chinanews.com](#), October 24; News [Radio French International](#), October 23).

Foreign and Military Policy

Throughout the 20th Party Congress, including in Xi's closing speech, there was no reference to the U.S. However, the rhetoric of the supreme leader and senior officials seemed geared toward intensifying the PRC's all-out competition with the U.S.-led "anti-China" coalition. Xi repeatedly called on Congress members and all Chinese to counter the "hegemonism and bullying" of other countries and urged the people to be "brave enough to wage struggle, and to be good at waging struggle" (NPC.gov.cn, October 24; News.cn, October 18). Even in the area of international business and normal people-to-people interaction between Chinese and Westerners, Xi has indicated the Chinese authorities would put national security well before economic considerations. As Xi and the new Politburo are likely to funnel more resources into military modernization, the chances of the potential outbreak of a "hot war" over Taiwan or in the South China Sea may increase ([VOA Chinese](http://VOA.Chinese), October 18; [Deutsche Welle Chinese](http://DeutscheWelle.Chinese), October 16).

In a reflection of Xi's heavy dependence on a state-of-the-art military to carry out his foreign policies, he has broken with the usual "retire at 68" rule to retain CMC Vice-Chairman Zhang Youxia (张又侠) for one more five-year term. General Zhang, who was born in 1950, had long been expected to retire this year. However, given the intimate friendship between the fathers of Zhang and Xi, the former enjoys the total trust of the Commander in Chief. Two other newly promoted generals on the seven-member CMC, Vice-Chairman He Weidong (何卫东; born 1957) and ordinary CMC member General Miao Hua (苗华; born 1955) have experience serving in the Fujian Province-based 31st Field Army as well as the now-defunct Nanjing Military Region, which covered Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. A high possibility exists that Xi first became acquainted with the two generals while serving in various positions in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces from 1985 to 2007. General He is a former commander of the Eastern Theatre Command, which includes Taiwan in its jurisdiction. General Miao is a veteran political commissar who is Director of the CMC's Department of Political Work (BusinessToday.com.tw, October 23; SCMP, October 23).

The other three new members of the CMC are General Zhang Shengmin (张胜民; born 1958), who oversees military discipline and anti-corruption work; former Commander of the Ground Forces General Liu Zhenli (刘振立; born 1964), who is a candidate for promotion to Chief of the Joint Staff Department; and General Li Shangfu (李尚福; born 1958), an accomplished aerospace engineer who is the incumbent Head of the Equipment Development of the CMC ([Headline News.HK](http://HeadlineNews.HK), October 24; BreakingDefense.com, October 17).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that many major congresses and conventions in socialist countries feature a plethora of grandiloquent speeches and pledges rather than solid pathways to concrete goals, the 20th Party Congress—including Xi's and other leaders' reports—focused almost entirely on theoretical concepts such as "Chinese-style modernization," "the great renaissance of the Chinese nation," and "daring to wage struggles." Although the State Statistical Bureau just announced that GDP growth in the third quarter of 2022 was 3.9 percent, most independent researchers and think tanks, including the World Bank, forecast an annual growth rate for the Chinese economy of around 2.8 percent or lower (Scio.gov.cn, October 24; CNBC.com, August 18). Outgoing Premier Li Keqiang, who has taken charge of the economy in the past four months, has gone against the

precepts of President Xi by calling for more foreign investment and a streamlined anti-pandemic regime ([China Brief](#), July 18). Yet the sole “trump card” that Li and other technocrats on the State Council have recommended is boosting stimulus for infrastructure projects to jack up economic growth ([Rthk.hk](#), August 30; [English.gov.cn](#), July 29). However, government investment is an old tool that is liable to lead to overleverage, waste and diminishing returns on outlays. While Xi and his cronies are celebrating their stunning victory at this Congress, they have to convince the nation and the international community that the economy can be fixed, particularly given the harsh sanctions and boycotts recently imposed on the PRC by the U.S. and its allies.

One disturbing factor affecting personnel changes at the Congress is that a host of Western-educated and market-oriented officials have retired. One of retiring Premier Li Keqiang’s last remarks was that “the waters of the Yellow and Yangtze River won’t flow backwards.” This was seen as a rebuke of the Maoist restoration undertaken by Xi. Other officials with backgrounds in working with and in the West include outgoing Vice Premier Liu He (刘鹤) a Harvard-educated economist, who was once a close adviser to Xi; Governor of the People’s Bank of China Yi Gang (易纲), who is a former economics professor at a U.S. university; and top-ranked banking regulator Guo Shuqing (郭树清).

Based on the new Central Committee membership list, the Director of the National Development and Reform Commission, He Lifeng (何立峰) is a clear candidate to replace Liu He as the Vice Premier in charge of economics ([Xinhuanet](#), October 22). He, however, gained Xi’s trust mainly because the two worked together in Fujian Province for many years. He Lifeng has very little reformist credentials. Xi’s overall preference for professional party apparatchiks over number-crunching technocrats has also led to a paucity of specialists in economic or financial matters on the Central Committee and the Politburo. Unless this situation is remedied, and Xi agrees to make more than token concessions on rigid ideological dogmas ranging from the zero-COVID regime to stringent party-state control over the economy, both Chinese and foreign observers will remain unconvinced that China can realize its dream of attaining superpower status by 2049.

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Editor’s Note: *This article was revised on October 28, 2022 to include additional information from the full text of the revised CCP constitution.*

The Russia-Ukraine War: Has Beijing Abandoned Pragmatic Diplomacy?

Justyna Szczudlik



(Image: Foreign Minister Wang Yi shakes hands with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of this year's UN General Assembly in New York, source: FMPRC)

Introduction

Chinese Chinese diplomats contend that Beijing's position on the "Russia-Ukraine conflict" (俄乌冲突 *E wu chongtu*) or the "Ukraine issue" (乌克兰问题, *Wukelan wenti*) is "consistent and clear" (一贯的、明确的, *yiguan de, mingque de*) ([People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), May 5). However, China's paradoxical stance on the Russia-Ukraine War underscores the difficulties that Beijing faces in carrying out sophisticated diplomacy. This has already had repercussions for China's national interests and ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Therefore, any change of course by Beijing coming out of the recently concluded 20th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress, appears unlikely.

Throughout the Russia-Ukraine War, China has neither condemned Russia, nor endorsed Ukraine for its resistance and self-defense. However, official discourse indicates the PRC's supportive posture towards Russia. For example, Beijing consistently accuses the West, primarily the U.S., of provoking Moscow through "constant eastward expansion by NATO" (北约不断东扩, *beiyue buduan dong kuo*). During his recent visit

to Russia, National People's Congress Standing Committee Chairman Li Zhanshu (栗战书) stated that China "understands and supports Russia" and echoed the Kremlin's narrative that "the United States and NATO are expanding directly on Russia's doorstep, threatening its national security and the lives of its citizens" ([Twitter](#), September 13). Furthermore, in the first phone call between Chinese FM, Wang Yi (王毅) and his Russian counterpart Sergiei Lavrov following the 20th Party Congress, Wang said that China "firmly supports the Russian side, under the leadership of President Putin, to unite and lead the Russian people to overcome difficulties, eliminate disturbances, realize the strategic development goals and further establish Russia's status as a major power on the international stage" ([FMPRC](#), October 27). He also expressed China's desire to deepen exchanges with Russia at all levels in order to promote international stability in a turbulent world.

At the same time that Beijing has lent some rhetorical and practical support to Moscow, China has stressed that on Ukraine it is necessary to adhere to the principles of the UN Charter: upholding sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries; resolving disputes in a peaceful way; and not imposing unilateral sanctions ([FMPRC](#), March 7). Chinese officials also appeal to all countries to make independent judgments (独立自主作出判断, *dulizizhu zuochu panduan*) on the Ukraine situation ([FMPRC](#), March 23; [China Brief](#), October 19). These appeals to the UN Charter are reasonable and right, but China's political backing of Russia and refusal to recognize Ukraine as a victim of aggression demonstrates disregard for the very principles that Beijing has called for adherence to since the outbreak of war. In its international conduct, the PRC often compromises its own rules and norms. This is neither new nor is Beijing's conduct unique in this regard. However, hitherto, the PRC has applied a double standard to its diplomacy in a rather sophisticated way that has limited the costs to its interests and international image. I have argued, for example, that China's land reclamation and militarization of the South China Sea or demonstration of its military power in the Taiwan Strait, despite being worrisome steps, were not very damaging to China's interests. The best example is Taiwan, which continues to demonstrate only limited concern over a potential PRC invasion. However, the PRC's explicit endorsement of Putin's Russia is a significant step further, which highlights the inconsistency in China's foreign policy and undercuts its diplomatic relations with the West in general and Europe in particular.

Growing Inconsistency in Chinese Diplomacy

In neither condemning Russia nor endorsing Ukraine, Beijing openly contravenes its putative commitment to upholding the UN Charter. Article 2 (4) of the Charter says: "all Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state." Article 51 stipulates the universal right to self-defense "if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations" ([United Nations](#), October 24, 1945). Furthermore, China is breaching, in an explicit way, its own "sacred" Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (和平共处的五项原则, *heping gongchu de wu xiang yuanze*)—commonly regarded as a cornerstone modern PRC diplomacy. The Five Principles, which are part of the PRC constitution are premised on opposition to all forms of external interference: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity (互相尊重主权和领土完整, *huxiang zunzhong zhuquan he lingtu wanzheng*), mutual non-aggression (互不侵犯, *hu bu qinfan*) and non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states (互不干涉内政, *hu bu ganshe neizheng*) ([PRC State Council](#), June 28, 2014).

Interference includes threats of force, military intervention and seeking forcible regime change, all of which Russia is doing to Ukraine. China's refusal to recognize this also undermines a long-held pretense of Chinese diplomacy, which is that the PRC operates according to the "Bandung Spirit," which derives from the 1955 Bandung conference among Asian and African nations that proclaimed opposition to hegemony, colonialism, racism, imperialism and military aggression ([FMPRC](#), April 22). Nonetheless, this commitment hardly looks credulous given Beijing's reticence to criticize Russian aggression and acceptance of Putin's claims that the "special military operation" is aimed at "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine" ([Kremlin](#), February 24). Moreover, in referring to the conflict as the "Ukraine issue," Beijing implicitly supports Moscow's efforts to eradicate Ukraine as a sovereign nation and incorporate it within a revived Russian imperium.

China opposes economic sanctions on Russia, arguing that the restrictions do not solve, but rather, complicate existing problems ([FMPRC](#), April 6). In the official PRC discourse, sanctions are described as a tool of hegemonic states, which only "adds fuel to the fire" (火上浇油, *huo shang jiao you*) in a crisis, ([Huangqi](#), August 1, 2017). Recently, China has criticized EU sanctions on Russia, warning that they will generate, lead to the mass influx of migrants and create energy shortages in Europe (Xinhuanet, [June 1](#); [July 3](#)). However, at the same time that Beijing derides EU financial actions targeting Russia, the PRC maintains its own (both formal and informal) sanctions on an EU member state – Lithuania, as well as multinational companies that do business with it, as a punitive response to Vilnius's decision to strengthen its unofficial ties with Taiwan ([China Brief](#), January 28). The PRC's measures, which are unprecedented in Europe, demonstrate a concerted attempt by Beijing to attenuate the common and free EU market. China's coercion against Lithuania resembles measures targeting Australia ([World Trade Organization \[WTO\]](#), January 31). Nevertheless, the Lithuania case is more blatant, as Beijing is targeting the world's largest trading bloc and an economy of 440 million consumers (WTO, [March 7](#); [January 31](#)). Furthermore, Beijing's sanctions targeting Australia were highly selective, ensuring protection of both national and parochial business interests, e.g., China did not ban imports of Australian iron ore on which its industry depends ([China Brief](#), October 4). Still, on Lithuania, Beijing is willing to damage its own interests by pressuring multinational companies to reroute global supply chains to ensure the exclusion of components from this Baltic nation.

China has sought to teach Lithuania a harsh lesson, even though Vilnius has neither violated international law, nor contravened China's own "core interests" (核心利益, *hexin liyi*). In addition, Lithuania adheres to a "one China policy." However, Beijing has been determined to punish the small Baltic country ever since its 2021 decision to allow the opening of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius. It was ultimately the name of the office – "Taiwanese" (駐立陶宛台灣代表處, *zhu Litaowan Taiwan daibiaochu*) instead of traditional "Taipei," which sparked China's ire, but this hardly implies Lithuanian recognition of Taiwan ([FMPRC](#), November 19, 2021).

Finally, China is calling on other countries, especially members of the EU, including Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries, to act independently. In other words, China suggests that European countries' condemnations of Russia and their increasing sense of insecurity due to Putin's assault are not due to their own agency (or feelings) but are rather, the result of the U.S. pressure ([China-CEEC Think Tanks Network](#), April 22). China has even gone so far as to call Central European countries' positions on the Russia-Ukraine war "emotional" ([Global Times](#), April 19). By way of contrast, Beijing portrays itself as making a sober, independent assessment

about the situation in Ukraine. However, official discourse reveals that PRC state media has echoed Russian disinformation and propaganda throughout the war. China also emulates Russia's pleas for building a new security system in Europe, including use of the Russian notion of the "principle of indivisibility of security" (安全不可分割原则, *anquan buke fenge yuanze*) that seeks to fundamentally revise the contemporary security order, particularly in Europe ([FMPRC](#), February 4). China has made repeated appeals for the U.S. and its allies to respect Russia's legitimate security concerns, labels NATO an expansionist "cold war organization" and repeats Russian disinformation that the U.S. operates biological weapons in Ukraine ([China Brief](#), July 17; [FMPRC](#), March 8).

Is Xi's Diplomacy Facilitating an Alliance Against China?

In recent months, as the PRC more noticeably approaches red lines, Beijing's international behavior has become increasingly detrimental to its own interests. In short, China is turning its own worst fear, the emergence of an anti-Chinese alliance or bloc, into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Western, mostly U.S., support for Ukraine have not distracted Washington from its focus on China, which from Beijing's perspective was a potential benefit of a European conflict. On the contrary, China's refusal to distance itself from a belligerent Russia has set off alarm bells across the West. Leaked U.S. intelligence has highlighted China's readiness to help Russia materially, mobilizing the West to scrutinize not only the PRC's narrative but also its actions. The best example is increasing U.S. pressure on China, including warnings about the consequences if Beijing decides to lend material assistance to Moscow. China's support for Russia was among the main topics during the Sullivan-Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) and Biden-Xi talks in March ([FMPRC](#), March 14; [FMPRC](#), March 18). Moreover, the Biden administration has largely prolonged the Trump administration's sanctions and tariffs on China and added new measures seeking to constrain the PRC's access to advanced technology ([Department of Commerce](#), October 13). Finally, President Biden himself has cast doubt on the U.S.'s longstanding policy of "strategic ambiguity" by repeatedly stating that U.S. forces will defend Taiwan should China invade ([Taipei Times](#), September 20).

The EU has also noticeably hardened its stance on China since Russia launched its all-out invasion of Ukraine in late February. EU officials emulated U.S. pressure (and warnings) to China during the EU-China summit in April. Although the EU officially still treats the PRC simultaneously as a partner, competitor and systemic rival, since the war began, China has been primarily viewed as a rival ([European Council, Council of the European Union](#), April 1). The recent EU Council meeting confirmed the EU's tougher China stance. Concerns were raised over the China-Russia "no-limits" partnership, the EU's strategic dependencies on the PRC and human rights ([European Council, October 21, October 21](#)). At the same time, the EU and its member states (mostly the Central and Eastern European countries) are strengthening their cooperation with Taiwan. Taiwan was mentioned explicitly in the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy ([European Commission](#) [EC], September 16, 2021). There has been a continuous exchange of visits between European and Taiwanese delegations ([CHOICE](#), September 15). Finally, the European Parliament has played a pioneering role in reinvigorating Taiwan-Europe ties, including calling for an assessment, public consultation and scoping exercise on a Bilateral Investment Agreement with Taipei ([European Parliament](#) [EP], September 15). It is worth recalling that China-EU

Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) remains frozen since the European Parliament's joint motion in mid-2021 ([EP](#), May 19, 2021).

China is clearly losing Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). China-CEE relations have been backsliding for some time, with the best example being Lithuania's withdrawal from the 17+1 format (China-Central and Eastern cooperation (中国—中东欧国家合作, *Zhongguo — Zhong dongou guojia hezuo*)) last year ([China Brief](#), August 12). Beijing's support for Russia, which is the largest and most imminent hard security threat for CEE countries – made the region even more suspicious and hawkish towards China. On August 11, Latvia and Estonia left the CEE format, while Czechia is almost ready to quit, waiting only for a good political momentum to do so ([Ministry of Foreign, Republic of Latvia](#), August 11; [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia](#), August 11; [CHOICE](#), July 28). For Poland, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's tacit backing of Russia, are the main issues in Warsaw's interactions with Beijing ([president.pl](#), July 29). The growing alignment with totalitarian Russia indicates that Beijing has already become a security threat for the CEE – a notion so far reserved for Russia, while China was previously seen largely as a long-term challenge or competitor solely in economic domain.

The regional environment in Asia is also becoming increasingly unfriendly for China. Countries that have long sought to hedge between the U.S./West and China are becoming China-skeptical and enhancing their ties with the U.S. and the EU. The best example is Japan, which has been a leader among Asian countries in imposing sanctions on Russia ([Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet](#), June 9). Another significant change is shifting Taiwanese national security perceptions. Despite being a long-term target of PRC economic coercion, Taiwanese public opinion has always been skeptical that Beijing would ever green-light a full-scale invasion ([China Brief](#), July 1). However, the Russian assault on Ukraine has begun to shift this perception. For example, in an opinion poll conducted in July, 61.8 percent of Taiwanese perceived that the threat from China has recently increased ([Taiwanese Public Opinion Poll](#) [TPOP], July 19). In that sense, a war in the Taiwan Strait is no longer unimaginable. Opinion polls conducted before and after U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan and the PRC's subsequent military exercises around the island indicate that in February about 63 percent of Taiwanese assessed that an invasion by the PRC is unlikely, while only about 27 percent deemed it likely. However, recent polls conducted after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war and Pelosi's visit, found that almost 40 percent of respondents now say an invasion by the PRC is likely, while about 53 percent still believe it remains unlikely ([TPOP](#), August 16).

Finally, China's support for Russia in its war on Ukraine may have negative consequences for its image among developing countries. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine is de facto neo-colonialism, countries in the Global South have tended to side with China and Russia, based on their mutual frustrations with the West in general and the U.S. in particular. Nevertheless, numerous countries across the Global South are signaling that their relationships with China are not free from concerns and tensions. A very telling example is the eight Pacific Island Countries demurring to sign a regional agreement with Chinese FM Wang Yi during his recent tour of the region ([FMPRC](#), May 30). At the same time, Western countries are becoming more active when it comes to winning hearts and minds across the Global South with initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway and Japan's promise to spend \$30 billion over the next three years on development programs in Africa to counter Chinese and Russian inroads ([EC](#), December 1, 2021; [MOFA](#), Japan, August 27).

Is Xi's Diplomacy Irrational?

What does Xi seek to gain by pursuing such a seemingly counterproductive approach to foreign policy? Here, it is tempting, but incorrect to conclude that Xi is acting irrationally. From his point of view, Xi's decision to pursue aggressive diplomacy is highly rational, as it serves to safeguard the ruling CCP regime's grip on power in China.

Xi's speeches often include the slogan "today's world is undergoing major changes unseen in a century" (当今世界正经历百年未有之大变局 *Dangjin shijie zheng jingli bainian wei you zhi da bianju*) ([Qiushi](#), August 27, 2021). However, over time, this phrase has been transformed from its original meaning. Hitherto, the slogan has denoted that the "East is Rising and the West is Declining" (东升西降 *dongsheng xi jiang*) creating a favorable environment for developing countries, including China, which defines itself as the world's biggest developing country (中国是世界上最大的发展中国家, *Zhongguo shi shijie shang zuida de fa zhan zhong guojia*). However, the situation has changed profoundly since Russia launched its full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, which has forced the world's two largest authoritarian regimes—China and Russia—into a corner. As Wang Yi said in April: the world today is in danger of being divided as never before (当今世界正前所未有地面临分裂的危险, *dangjin shijie zheng qiansuoweiyou di mianlin fenlie de weixian*) ([FMPRC](#), April 24). While delivering his report at the 20th CCP Congress, Xi Jinping said that China is facing rapid changes in the international situation, especially external blackmail, containment, blockade, and extreme pressure (面对外部讹诈、遏制、封锁、极限施压, *mian dui waibu ezha, ezhi, fengsuo, jixian shi ya*) ([Xinhuanet](#), October 25).

Several factors have combined to alert Xi to the possible emergence of an anti-authoritarian bloc. The West, including like-minded Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia and Japan, displayed unexpected unity in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, displaying readiness to pay a painful price for abrupt decoupling from Russia. Moreover, Xi is unnerved by both Biden's idea to build an alliance of democracies; and the rising global visibility of Taiwan. Consequently, the PRC is increasingly concerned about sustaining its own political regime, especially as Russia is losing the war and Xi is witnessing the mounting domestic problems in the Russian Federation, including rising social discontent. It is well known that since the demise of the Soviet Union and socialist bloc, Chinese leaders have deeply rooted in their minds a post-traumatic syndrome over the disintegration of the socialist bloc at the end of the Cold War. Xi is no exception ([Xinhua](#), October 10, 2019). The decline of Russia, China's main international friend in maintaining its authoritarian regime, may evoke the trauma of the collapse of the socialist bloc. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent, extensive Western condemnation of Russia and growing pressure on China, more open and aggressive anti-Western, anti-NATO and anti-democratic slogans are noticeable in Chinese official discourse. The best example is a deluge of "cold war mentality" slogans (冷战思维, *lengzhan siwei*) and arguments of already existing NATO's involvement in Asia-Pacific (北约也在频繁介入亚太事务, *beiyue ye zai pinfan jieru yatai shiwu*), which assert that the U.S. is orchestrating the return of zero-sum power politics to the region ([FMPRC](#), May 6). The

CCP leadership's pretensions that the real threats are from the West are also useful to excuse and distract from China's snowballing domestic economic and social problems.

Despite its rhetoric, Beijing may increasingly see a world composed of competing democratic and authoritarian blocs. Therefore, Xi seeks to counteract what he likely perceives as growing pressure from the U.S.-led democratic bloc. One way that China has sought to ameliorate this predicament is by intensifying its outreach to developing countries. In April, Xi proposed the Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议, *Quanqiu anquan changyi*), which seeks to appeal to developing countries by applying a "holistic security" framework that goes beyond purportedly narrow Western security concepts (更是对西方地缘政治安全理论的扬弃超越, *geng shi dui xifang diyuan zhengzhi anquan lilun de yangqi chaoyue*) ([China Brief](#), May 13; [FMPRC](#), April 24). This initiative was announced at the Boao Forum and has been promoted extensively in PRC leaders' meetings with developing countries, including in forums such as BRICS or Shanghai Cooperation Organization ([FMPRC](#), September 16; [FMPRC](#), June 23). This is also the reason why in China-Russia encounters, two central topics in Chinese readouts are always emphasizing mutual support for core interests (中方愿同俄方在涉及彼此核心利益问题上相互有力支持, *zhongfang yuan tong e fang zai sheji bici hexin liyi wenti shang xiang hu youli zhichi*) and promoting cooperation with developing and emerging countries or markets (维护广大发展中国家和新兴市场国家共同利益, *weihu guangda fazhan zhong guojia he xinxing shichang guojia gongtong liyi*) ([FMPRC](#), September 15).

Conclusion

Concerns about regime survival due to consolidation of the Western democratic bloc and its growing pressure on Russia and China (as well as the PRC's domestic problems) are the primary reasons why Beijing's adoption of a more accommodating diplomatic posture during Xi's third-term is unlikely. Instead, Xi will likely continue a tough approach toward the West and will be focusing more on the developing countries in order to solidify and expand the "southern" block. This two-fold diplomacy—hardness toward the West and softness toward the South—may create additional global tensions that intensify the growing rivalry between the democratic West and China/Russia in the Global South. The outcome of this competition may determine whether China is able to modify the existing global order according to its needs and national interests or is compelled to focus on building a parallel international system.

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China Increases Support for Pakistan's Naval Modernization with an Eye on the Indian Ocean

Syed Fazl-e-Haider



(Image: The Pakistan Navy Frigate *Taimur* in Shanghai for joint exercises in July, **source:** Global Times)

Introduction

In mid-July, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and the Pakistan Navy (PN) held the “Sea Guardians-2” exercise in the waters off Shanghai ([China Brief](#), October 4; [Pakistan Television](#), July 12). The joint naval drills focused on neutralizing maritime security threats, particularly those that might jeopardize strategic sea lanes. The bilateral exercise also included joint target practice, anti-submarine, anti-aircraft and anti-missile drills ([China Military Online \[CMO\]](#), July 13). The drills built on the first iteration of the exercise, Sea Guardians-1, which was held in January 2020 in the North Arabian Sea off Karachi, Pakistan. The participation in these exercises of the guided missile frigate *Taimur*, which is the most advanced warship built by China for the PN, demonstrates the increasing level of Chinese support for the training and modernization of Pakistan's naval forces ([Global Times](#), July 10).

Bilateral military ties, which are a mainstay of the China-Pakistan all-weather friendship and strategic partnership, have strengthened in recent years. China is the main supplier of military equipment to Pakistan, which from 2017-2021 absorbed nearly 47 percent of all Chinese arms exports ([China Brief](#), March 25). In a

move to further deepen defense ties, China provided Pakistan with J-10C multi-role fighters in late 2021 ([South Asian Voices](#), April 12). In June, a high-powered Pakistani delegation comprising top brass from the army, navy and air force paid a visit to China at a time when tensions between China and the West were on the rise ([CMO](#), June 12). The visit was part of the Pakistan-China Joint Military Cooperation Committee (PCJMCC), which is the highest body involved in facilitating bilateral defense cooperation. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa also attended the top-level committee's meeting, along with senior-most counterparts in the PLA. Both countries vowed to further deepen their strategic partnership in challenging times and enhance their joint military cooperation in training, technology and counterterrorism ([Express Tribune](#), June 12).

China's Role in Modernizing the Pakistan Navy

For the past few years, China-Pakistan military cooperation has become more focused on Pakistan's naval forces. The procurement of technologically more advanced platforms from China, is a central part of Pakistan's efforts to modernize its naval fleet. Under a U.S. \$5 billion deal signed in 2016, Pakistan will acquire eight Chinese Yuan-class type-041 diesel submarines by 2028 ([Naval News](#), June 24).

Beijing has stepped up its support for Pakistan's naval modernization in order to strengthen the capabilities of a key partner that will assist it in addressing the security challenges facing China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China has simultaneously increased its naval presence in the IOR, establishing its first overseas military facility in the Horn of Africa in Djibouti. China is also the builder and operator of the Indian Ocean port at Gwadar on Pakistan's southwest coast, an essential part of \$62 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ([China Brief](#), July 15). CPEC is supposed to link the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang to Pakistan's Gwadar port through a network of highways, railways and energy pipelines ([Belt and Road Forum](#), April 10, 2017).

Strategically located at the terminus of the Arabian Sea, the port of Gwadar lies just 624 nautical kilometers east of Strait of Hormuz—the narrow waterway between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Presently, about 25 percent of the world's oil passes from source countries in the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz en route to foreign markets. Gwadar is China's trump card in the great game for dominance over the Indian Ocean's sea lanes ([Express Tribune](#), May 13, 2015).

In January, the PN commissioned its most advanced vessel, the guided missile frigate, *Tughril*, which was built at the Shanghai Shipyard. The *Tughril*, which is armed with Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) and Supersonic Surface to Surface Missiles (SSMs), is a versatile warship capable of undertaking multiple missions. In the coming years, Pakistan will commission three more advanced frigates, which the navy views as force multipliers ([Pakistan Today](#), January 23). In the beginning of this year, the Pakistan Navy not only inducted the PNS *Tughril* into service, but also rolled out ten Sea King helicopters, which were a gift from Qatar ([Dawn](#), January 25).

In June, China delivered the *Taimur*, the second of four powerful Type 054A/P frigates built in Shanghai for the PN. The addition of these advanced frigates enhances the PN's capability to operate in distant waters, which is demonstrated by its ability to conduct joint drills with the PLA Navy in the East China Sea this year ([Global](#)

[Times](#), July 10). Initially, Pakistan signed a contract with China in 2017 for the delivery of two Type 054 A/P frigates. However, the contract was renewed to include production of two more ships in 2018. Under the deal, all four ships will be built in China ([Naval News](#), June 24).

Beijing has also committed to deliver eight Chinese submarines to Pakistan as part of its plan to modernize the PN ([The Print](#), November 9, 2021). The Chinese-made J-10 fighter, which is part of China's naval arm, can be used by the Pakistan Navy to carry out maritime operations in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The warplane can carry anti-ship missiles, which could enable PN to play a more responsive role in the Indian Ocean ([South Asian Voices](#), April 12).

China-Pakistan-Turkey Triangle Strengthens Pakistani Navy, Lays Ground for Trilateral CPEC

Along with China, Turkey is also playing a key role in strengthening and modernizing the PN fleet. In 2018, Pakistan and Turkey signed a contract for the construction of four Milgem class corvettes based on the design of Turkish Ada-class ships. Under the deal, Turkey is bound to deliver four ships to PN by February 2025. In May, Turkey launched the third Milgem Corvette for the PN, the *Badr*, at the Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works (KS&EW) ([Naval News](#), May 20).

Speaking at the launch ceremony of the *Badr* at the KS&EW in May, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressed hope that strong Turkey-Pakistan defense ties would strengthen relations between the Pakistani military and Turkish defense firms. On the occasion, Sharif suggested turning CPEC into a trilateral arrangement between China, Pakistan and Turkey ([Dawn](#), May 30). "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will translate our desire to expand connectivity and maximize trade and transshipment with Gwadar as the focal point," he said ([Business Recorder](#), May 20). President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also virtually addressed the *Badr's* launch ceremony stating that Turkey would provide the necessary support to strengthen Pakistan's military infrastructure ([Naval News](#), May 20). The purchase and receipt of the corvettes paves the way for the future manufacture of more PN vessels in cooperation with Turkey.

Shebaz Sharif's suggestion to make CPEC a trilateral arrangement has given further impetus to the development of the China-Pakistan-Turkey triangle, particularly in terms of defense cooperation. Both China and Turkey are already playing a key role in the modernization of the PN and developing its maritime infrastructure. In June 2016, Pakistan signed a contract with Turkish defense contractor STM for the modernization of the PN's three Agosta 90B submarines, which were designed and built by France ([STM](#)). The same Turkish company also won the contract to design and build a fleet tanker for the Pakistan Navy ([Andalou Agency](#), December 4, 2018).

If Turkey joins CPEC, the development of Gwadar's maritime infrastructure will be a key priority. For China, Gwadar port is the key to expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean. As a transit conduit for China's trade and energy, the Indian Ocean is of immense geopolitical importance for China, including to secure the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that connect China to Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Without a significant naval presence in the region, China cannot become a key player in the Indian Ocean and ultimately, a global maritime power. The growing Chinese presence and influence is likely to lead to the Indian Ocean's emergence

as a center of major geopolitical competition that also heavily involves India, Pakistan, the U.S. and other key regional players ([Observer Research Foundation](#), January 2, 2021)

Conclusion

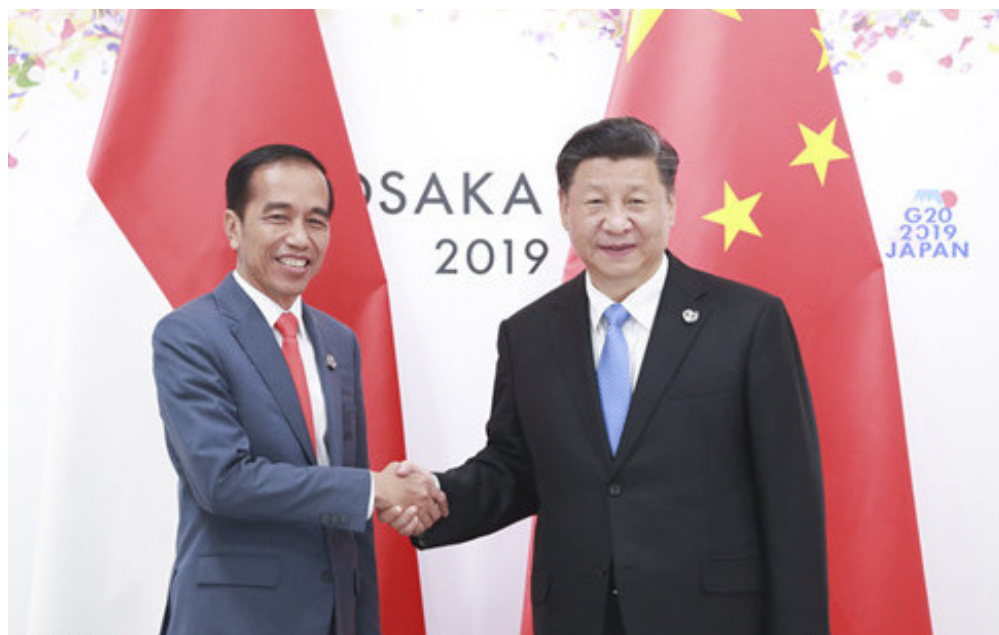
The modernization of the PN and the development of Gwadar port are not only a part of China-Pakistan cooperation to safeguard BRI sea routes, but also support the PLA Navy's presence in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. A modern naval base at Gwadar could enable the PLA Navy to patrol sea-lanes and monitor naval patrols by the U.S. in the Indian Ocean, which is the strategic link between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in terms of oil transportation in the region. U.S. Navy "freedom of navigation" operations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Straits are already a major source of frustrations for Beijing, which lays claim to much of the East Asian littoral. As a result, Beijing may seek to settle its score with the U.S. in the Indian Ocean by gaining strategic depth with a naval base at Gwadar.

Presently, Pakistan cannot come close to matching the maritime power of its archrival India, but the continued push for modernization and renewed strategic cooperation with China and Turkey could change the status quo by transforming Pakistan into a genuine regional naval power. A strong PN equipped with advanced frigates and other weapons is part of Beijing's grand plan to ensure the security of Chinese oil imports coming from the Persian Gulf and attain control of the sea-lanes traversing the Indian Ocean.

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Upcoming G20 Summit Spotlights Close but Complicated Relationship Between Xi and Indonesia's Jokowi

William Yuen Yee



(Image: *President Xi shakes hands with Indonesian President Jokowi at the 2019 G20 Summit in Osaka, Japan,*
source: Xinhua)

Introduction

On In a recent interview, Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo confirmed that both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin plan to attend the upcoming Group of 20 (G20) summit in Bali from November 15-16 ([Channel News Asia \[CNA\]](#), August 19). The summit will mark Jokowi’s second in-person meeting with Xi this year, after a July summit in which Jokowi became the first foreign leader to visit Beijing after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine ([Gov.cn](#), July 27).

For many external observers, Xi’s attendance at the G20 summit represents yet another sign that Jakarta has shifted closer to Beijing, propelled by the close personal relationship between both leaders. Still, Jokowi’s relationship with the Chinese leader is close but complicated. Several issues including the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail line, territorial disputes over the Natuna Islands and China’s treatment of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang continue to complicate bilateral relations.

Good Friends and Good Brothers?

“Indonesia and China are good friends and good brothers,” reported a Chinese government press readout from a phone call between both leaders last year ([Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Ireland](#), April 20, 2021). Actions speak louder than words, and the frequent exchanges between the two leaders appear to affirm their steady, mutual friendship. Yet despite all his statements and visits purporting to signal interest in deepening ties with Beijing, Jokowi seems less interested in Xi Jinping himself and more interested in what a relationship with China can do for Indonesia.

The close feelings—officially at least—appear to be mutual. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both leaders spoke over the phone six times, including twice in 2022 before Jokowi’s July visit ([Nikkei Asia](#), July 28). During his first two years in office, Jokowi met with Xi five times ([The Jakarta Post](#), September 3, 2016). Moreover, following a week of global summits in 2014, Jokowi said that Xi—along with Japan’s Shinzo Abe—were the friendliest world leaders with whom he had met. [1] Notably, Jokowi’s answer named the leaders of Asia’s two largest and most powerful countries, both of which play a major role in bolstering Indonesia’s own developing economy. China is Indonesia’s biggest trading partner, with \$124.4 billion in total bilateral trade in 2021, and its third largest foreign investor, accounting for 10 percent of total foreign direct investment ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), accessed October 31). Japan is Indonesia’s third-largest trading partner and plays a crucial role in financing the Southeast Asian nation’s infrastructure development, including the ongoing construction of Jakarta’s rapid transit system ([Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), accessed October 31; [BKPM](#), accessed October 31). Jokowi’s strategic pragmatism certainly informs his public diplomacy. When asked why he felt Xi and Abe were the friendliest foreign leaders, Jokowi’s response was vague: “I don’t know... We talked a lot.” [2]

Such realism follows an extended Indonesian tradition of foreign policy nonalignment that stretches back to the republic’s founding in 1945. As an independent Indonesia emerged from the rubble of a hard-fought war against the Dutch, future Prime Minister Mohammad Hatta articulated two policies that would become the bedrock of Indonesia’s relations with other nations: “free and active” (*bebas dan aktif*) and “rowing between two reefs” (*mendayung antara dua karang*). In the context of the Cold War, Hatta sought to keep Indonesia out of the fractious conflict between Russia and America.

Jokowi has put his own spin on the tradition of nonalignment, refusing to take sides in divisive but distant conflicts and embracing a role as a global mediator. For example, in June, Jokowi became the first Asian leader to travel to Kyiv and Moscow to meet with Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin, arguing that Indonesia could serve as a “bridge of peace” between Russia and Ukraine ([Jakarta Globe](#), August 16). Before the Russia-Ukraine War, he brokered intra-Afghan peace talks at his presidential palace in Bogor, although such discussions mostly failed to produce lasting results ([The Jakarta Post](#), March 14, 2018).

“For me ‘free and active’ is making friends with countries that can provide us with benefits,” the Indonesian leader has said ([Australian Financial Review](#), August 28, 2020). For now, Jokowi believes that China can provide Indonesia with many advantages, including low-cost loans through the Belt and Road Initiative and substantial investment and trade flows. But other aspects of the bilateral relationship between Beijing and Jakarta indicate that the relationship is more complex and mixed than initially meets the eye.

No Rose Without Thorns

A host of historical issues like ideological differences, anti-Chinese violence in Jakarta, and the Indonesian government's anti-Communist purge that caused the deaths of nearly one million people in the 1960s complicate bilateral China-Indonesia relations. Of late, three significant topics have challenged Jokowi's seemingly cordial relationship with Xi: the Jakarta-Bandung railway project, territorial disputes over the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea, and the treatment of Muslim Uyghurs in Western China's Xinjiang region.

First, the Jakarta-Bandung railway project remains a sensitive issue for Jokowi due to costly operational delays and concerns about Indonesia's excessive debt burden to China. The project is not scheduled to finish construction until June of next year—four years behind its initial completion target of 2019 ([Kompas](#), July 30). Previously, the project was hailed as one of the signature initiatives of China's Belt and Road Initiative, linking two major cities and enabling Indonesia to become the first Southeast Asian nation with a high-speed train ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#)). Nevertheless, enthusiasm for the project has dimmed due to excessive debts and cost overruns. Amid construction delays, the project's price tag has increased by 23 percent from an already-hefty \$6.07 billion ([The Jakarta Post](#), August 1). For Jokowi, who has staked part of his political identity on a track record of successful infrastructure construction, the issues surrounding the project are particularly worrisome.

Second, the Natuna Islands dispute in the South China Sea has been a thorn in the side of Beijing-Jakarta relations since 2019. China claims sovereignty over the islands under its nine-dash line, a sweeping territorial claim rejected by both the Indonesian government and an international tribunal in The Hague in 2016 ([Kompas](#), April 12, 2021). But in its public statements, Indonesia has sought to avoid confronting China over the Natuna Islands, reiterating that it is not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes and does not possess any overlapping maritime jurisdiction with China ([CNA](#), June 19, 2020). The strategic value of the islands lies in their richness in natural gas and marine life. The number of fish caught in the region reaches nearly half a million tons per year ([Voice of Indonesia](#), September 20, 2021).

One study from Indonesia's premier graduate military academy called Beijing's military threat to Indonesia's sovereignty over the disputed Natuna Islands "highly imminent" ([Twitter](#), January 30, 2021). Last year, Chinese law enforcement vessels conducted continuous patrols around a new Indonesian drilling site north of the Natuna Islands, and a Chinese survey ship monitored the seabed within Indonesia's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf ([Jakarta Post](#), December 21, 2021).

Still, Indonesia's actions on this issue speak louder than its words. In a reflection of Jakarta's concerns about China's assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific, the Indonesian army expanded its annual Garuda Shield exercises this year to their largest-ever size, which included 14 total countries such as the U.S., Australia, Canada, Malaysia, and Singapore. For the first time, Japan participated in the drills that have now been dubbed "Super Garuda Shield" ([U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Indonesia](#), August 3). The exercises in the South Sumatra province featured a combined force of 4,000 troops from the U.S. and Indonesia.

The third complicating factor in the Xi-Jokowi relationship is Beijing's controversial treatment of Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This poses a particular challenge for Jokowi, who leads the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. Jokowi has taken many steps to burnish his Islamic credentials in response to frequent domestic criticism that he does not sufficiently protect Muslim interests. For example, he has condemned Myanmar's treatment of minority Rohingya Muslims and selected Ma'ruf Amin, a hardline Muslim cleric, as his vice president.

But his response to the ongoing human rights abuses in Xinjiang has been noticeably muted. In 2019, Jokowi avoided weighing in on the situation, despite domestic protests calling for Jakarta to adopt a tougher stance on China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslims ([Benar News](#), December 27, 2019). When asked two years later, Jokowi's answer did not mention China by name and instead responded in general terms: "We must not contradict Islam with democracy... Islam and Indonesia respect each other. We expect all countries to do the same" ([BNN](#), April 7, 2021). It is difficult to pinpoint the precise reason behind Jokowi's tight-lipped responses on the Xinjiang issue. Many U.S.-based analysts argue that this reflects Indonesia's deepening relations with China and his personal friendship with Xi. But a report from the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict raised other domestic political rationales, for instance, that Jokowi's embracing a more assertive stance on the situation might further embolden Indonesia's hardline Islamic right ([South China Morning Post](#), June 23, 2019).

Conclusion

The November G20 summit will likely mark the first in-person meeting between Xi Jinping and President Biden since the American leader's inauguration, and it is fitting that such an event will occur in Joko Widodo's Indonesia. The 61-year-old leader has fashioned himself into an activist, honest broker on the world stage, recently proclaiming Indonesia to be at the "pinnacle of global leadership" while adhering to Indonesia's longstanding foreign policy of nonalignment ([Kompas](#), August 16).

In this polarized era of geopolitical competition, it is easy to view any move taken by other countries within the context of U.S.-China rivalry. In the case of Jokowi and Southeast Asia's largest nation, however, the situation is more complex. While Jokowi wants to foster close ties with Beijing, he is more interested in elevating and advancing the interests of Indonesia. That narrow, self-interested lens is the one through which the world should ultimately understand Jokowi's relationship with China and Xi Jinping.

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Notes

[1] See Ben Otto and Joko Hariyanto, "[Fast Friends for Jokowi: Xi and Abe](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, November 17, 2014.

[2] *Ibid*