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History and Heritage: As COVID Misery Mounts, Xi Looks to the Past for Lessons and Legitimacy

John S. Van Oudenaren

Long lines of cars have recently been reported at Beijing's funeral homes and crematoriums ([VOA Chinese](#), December 17). This body backlog belies official assurances that COVID-19 deaths in China's capital remain in the single digits. At times, the dichotomy between the reality of the COVID-19 wave sweeping the city and official rhetoric has verged on the absurd. For example, in a December 13 briefing, Vice Premier Sun Chunlan, who oversees epidemic prevention efforts, claimed that in Beijing, only "fifty critically ill COVID-19 patients are currently hospitalized, most of whom have preexisting conditions" ([People's Republic of China \[PRC\] State](#)

[Council](#), December 13). Such statements are undoubtedly damaging with public trust in the government currently so low. The unprecedented mass protests in late November against stringent epidemic prevention measures, which likely prompted the rapid zero-COVID phase-out, demonstrated the extent of popular dissatisfaction with excessive COVID controls and economic stagnation ([China Brief](#), November 28).



(Image: General Secretary Xi waves to people in a park dedicated to Zhu Xi, a renowned 12th century Chinese philosopher, in Nanping City, Fujian, **source:** Xinhua)

As the latest COVID-19 wave hit China, state media heavily covered the 85th anniversary of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, the horrific mass slaughter of Chinese civilians by Imperial Japanese forces in the Republic of China's wartime capital. Xinhuanet, the National Memorial Network and other media platforms launched a large-scale online campaign: "Never Forget National Humiliation, Fulfill the China Dream" (勿忘国耻、圆梦中华, *wu wang guochi, yuanmeng zhonghua*) ([XHBY.net](#), December 9). The official national memorial service in Nanjing on December 13 featured a speech by Politburo Standing Committee Member Cai Qi ([Xinhua Daily Telegraph](#), December 13). Cai venerated the victims of the massacre, but also noted it is a "comfort to these martyrs and compatriots, that after generations of striving, the nation has undergone momentous transformations to build a modern socialist country"—a China that "stands tall among the world's nations." This focus on the interim between 1937 and the present is unsurprising, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), at least militarily, played a tertiary role in determining the course of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). When Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China in 1937, the invading forces met fierce resistance from the crack, KMT National Republican Army (NRA) forces at the Battle of Shanghai, which preceded the Nanjing massacre [1] However, China's resurrection from victim to victor is a central element of the CCP's

historical narrative, which emphasizes the leading role of the Party in restoring China to its rightful civilizational greatness following a “century of humiliation” in which the Japanese invasion was a nadir ([China Brief](#), October 8, 2021).

In recalling the historical sacrifices of the Sino-Japanese War and the successes that followed, the party seeks to instill in the Chinese people the mindset that great achievements require immense sacrifices. This language of “People’s War” (人民战争, *renmin zhanzheng*) is now used to characterize the PRC’s ongoing, three-year struggle with COVID-19. For example, a recent *People’s Daily* editorial, under the penname Ren Zhongping (任仲平) denoting the official party perspective, stated that under the leadership of Xi and the CCP, the trials of the past three years have strengthened the unity and fighting spirit of the masses ([People’s Daily](#), December 15).

No Victory Lap

Since attaining a third term at the 20th Party Congress in late October, General Secretary Xi Jinping has achieved some modest foreign policy successes. In November, he met with a bevy of world leaders, including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who visited Beijing in early November and U.S. President Joseph R. Biden on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Bali, Indonesia ([Xinhuanet](#), [November 4](#); [November 16](#)). In addition to orchestrating a slight lowering of the temperature in U.S.-China relations and a more significant thaw in ties with leading European powers such as Germany and France, Xi has sought to invigorate emerging strategic partnerships ([Xinhuanet](#), November 15). Earlier this month, he made a state visit to Saudi Arabia, where he presided over the launch of two new Sino-centric multilateral fora designed to intensify Beijing’s engagement with the Middle East and North Africa, the China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council summit ([China Daily](#), December 10).

For Xi, glittering summits with foreign counterparts, which invariably receive widespread state media coverage, cannot compensate for the recent string of setbacks Xi has suffered at home since the 20th Party Congress as the PRC’s exit from the “dynamic clearance” (动态清零, *dongtai qingling*) zero-COVID has veered badly off script. The initial spur for the mass protests that broke out in major cities across China at the end of November was national outrage over the unnecessary deaths of as many as forty people in an Urumqi, Xinjiang apartment fire on November 24 due to strict COVID-controls, which spurred public pushback against the zero-COVID policy. However, this popular outrage quickly expanded to include broader critiques of CCP rule ([Global Taiwan Brief](#), December 14). Although the CCP blamed “hostile foreign forces” for the short-lived, but impactful “white paper revolution” protests, epidemic prevention restrictions were rapidly loosened in early December.

Despite the issuance of a series of extensive official guidelines, the latest of which is the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council’s “ten guidelines” (十条, *shítiao*), the rapid rollback of the zero-COVID policy appears to have proceeded in a largely ad hoc manner ([National Health Commission \[NHC\]](#), December 9). In a clear sign of early stress on the medical infrastructure, on December 9, the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) issued strict pricing guidelines for the medical supply market that require sellers to charge market prices, ensuring price transparency, forbidding price gouging, fixing, collusion or discrimination

([SAMR](#), December 9). Similar guidelines were issued for online sales of daily necessities, including grain, vegetables, eggs and meat ([SAMR](#), December 10).

Instead of bringing relief, the rapid lifting of epidemic prevention measures has plunged many Chinese people into another round of misery as COVID-19 spreads rapidly, overwhelming the healthcare system and threatening death on a mass scale. Consequently, the juxtaposition between the realities of life for ordinary Chinese and the triumphalist image projected by CCP propaganda organs has grown starker. In the early 1990s, when public disillusionment with CCP leadership was high following the Tiananmen massacre and the fall of the Soviet Union, the party leveraged “patriotic” education and propaganda to craft an image as the guardian of China’s ancient civilizational greatness.

Custodian of Chinese Civilization

Xi has consistently stressed the need for China to build up its “cultural self-confidence.” His Party Congress work report includes a whole section on “Building Cultural Confidence and Strength and Securing New Successes in Developing Socialist Culture” ([Xinhua](#), October 25). A key element of these efforts is “extending the appeal and reach of Chinese civilization.” Xi stressed “we will stay firmly rooted in Chinese culture; collect and refine the defining symbols and best elements of Chinese culture and showcase them to the world; will accelerate the development of China’s discourse systems; better tell China’s stories; make China’s voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable.” This echoes Xi’s remarks at a Politburo study session in May on the importance of researching the origins of early Chinese civilization that: “Chinese Communists are not historical or cultural nihilists. We must never forget our heritage or belittle ourselves” ([QStheroy.cn](#), July 16). The study session’s purpose was to further the Chinese Civilization Origins Project, an effort launched in 2002 that enlisted a cross-disciplinary array of scholars to unearth new information on the history of early Chinese civilization from 3500 to 1500 BC ([China Daily](#), May 29). At the session, Xi lauded the project for “generating evidence of one million years of humanity, ten thousand years of culture, and more than five thousand years of civilization in China.”

The official effort to showcase the glory of Chinese civilization for both domestic and international audiences appears set to accelerate during Xi’s third term. The Image Possibilities Coproduction Plan, a multinational collaboration between state media conglomerates, including China International Communications Group and the Fujian Provincial Administration of Radio and Television, and private media companies, including Bilibili and the U.S.-based Discovery Channel, recently selected 62 documentary proposals for production ([State Council Information Office](#), December 14; [China.cn](#), August 8). The documentaries selected by the Image Possibilities Coproduction Plan, which operates under the guidance of the State Council Information Office, the Cyberspace Administration of China, and the National Radio and Television Administration, will showcase topics including “fine traditional Chinese culture” and building a “community of common destiny.”

Conclusion

For the CCP, espousing the unique contributions of Chinese civilization to humanity goes beyond national pride to encompass a broader corrective to perceived foreign misconceptions about China. A key theme in Xi’s remarks to the May Politburo study session is that while Chinese civilization has greatly benefited from

exchanges with other civilizations, China has always followed its own unique development path. Moreover, Xi stressed that “many in the West view China as a modern nation state through the prism of Western modernization theory instead of approaching China from the perspective of its over 5,000-year history of civilization” and, as a result, “fail to truly understand our past, present, and future” (QStheroy.cn, July 16).

The combination of tremendous confidence in China’s deep civilizational legacy and belief in the CCP’s entitlement to carry this tradition forward has fostered a strong sense among the top leadership that they are engaged in a sacred mission. In their view, the best means to realize the “China Dream” is by following the CCP’s dominant contemporary ideology of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (Xinhua, July 28). Consequently, CCP leadership is liable to view any domestic or international doubt regarding this narrative as a challenge to its self-assigned historic mission. Nevertheless, the CCP cannot claim a monopoly on Chinese identity. This dynamic was poignantly illustrated during a demonstration in Beijing, where students pushed back against a school official who said their actions were motivated by anti-China foreign forces, retorting: “Was it the foreign forces that set the fire in Xinjiang?” and, “When you say foreign forces, are you talking about Marx and Engels?” (YouTube, November 28). Such sentiments strike the CCP at its most sensitive point, which is that Marxist-Leninism is ultimately a foreign import, hence the need to always modify it to include “with Chinese characteristics.” Hence, a significant portion of educated Chinese, particularly young people, may believe that Xi and perhaps even the CCP itself are unfaithful stewards of China’s great civilizational heritage.

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Notes

[1] The heroism of the NRA forces at Shanghai is lionized even in PRC media, see the 2020 blockbuster “The Eight Hundred” [八百], YouTube, September 2020).

Will a Successor to Xi Jinping Emerge from the Party's Seventh-Generation Leadership?

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Full members of the newly appointed 20th Central Committee raise their hands for a motion during its first plenary session in Beijing on October 23,), source: Xinhua)

Introduction

General Secretary Xi Jinping has a long record of breaking with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rules and conventions. At the recently concluded 20th Party Congress, he made himself the “party core for life” by revising the CCP charter and reinforced that position by filling the ranks of the Central Committee and Politburo with members of his own faction ([China Brief](#), October 24). As a result, it is doubtful that any real or potential rival will emerge to challenge Xi’s all but announced intention of ruling through at least the 22nd Party Congress in 2032. Hence, Xi has now spurned another key party institution: a transparent and orderly succession process ([BBC Chinese](#), October 28; [Radio French International](#), October 12).

A Break From Generational Succession

A key institutional change implemented by Deng Xiaoping as the chief architect of reform was to limit the party chief to two five-year terms, with a successor named a half decade before their retirement. This arrangement sought to avoid the confusion of the Mao Zedong era, when the anointment of a number of putative “successors,” including President Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), Marshal Lin Biao (林彪) and security chief Hua

Guofeng (华国锋) only succeeded in exacerbating internecine bickering among disparate party factions. And of course, the first two anointed successors to Deng himself, general secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, also failed to effectively attain the top leadership role by gaining full control of the party-state and military apparatus.

Deng established the so-called generational succession model in the early 1980s ([Radio Free Asia](#), October 27). Thus Jiang Zemin (born 1926), the “core of the Third-Generation leadership” was succeeded by Hu Jintao (1942), the representative of the Fourth Generation cadres who were born in the 1940s. Finally, Hu passed the mantle to the representative of the Fifth Generation, Xi Jinping (born 1953). However, it is unlikely that any Sixth-Generation (6G) cadre will succeed Xi ([China Brief](#), November 12, 2021). According to the well-observed party convention called *qishang baxia*, 七上八下 (a reference to the fact that the retirement age for the Politburo Standing Committee [PBSC] is 68, while those aged 67 or below can serve for one more term), the successor of Xi must be under 68 at the 22nd Party Congress in 2032 ([Radio French International](#) January 2). While it is possible that Xi will not follow the retire-at-68 convention in 2032, the *qishangbaxia* rule was largely followed at the 19th and 20th Party Congresses.

However, the relatively young members of the newly elected Politburo and PBSC, namely PBSC member Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥; born 1962), and ordinary Politburo members Yuan Jiajun (袁家军; 1962), Chen Min'er (陈敏尔; 1962), Liu Guozhong (刘国中; 1962), Li Shulei (李书磊; 1964) and Chen Jining (陈吉宁; 1964) would all be at or over age 68 in 2032 and thus would not be able to satisfy the *qishang baxia* dictate for induction or retention on the PBSC ([Xinhua](#), October 23). On the personnel front, this development has left the door open for Seventh-Generation (7G) rising stars, who were born in the 1970s. Among the 171 alternate (meaning non-voting and second-tier) members of the Central Committee endorsed last October, around 30 are 7G neophytes ([Xinhua](#), October 22). Five cadres on the 131-member Central Commission for Discipline Commission, which is the nation's highest-level anti-graft unit, were also born in the 1970s ([Caixin.com](#), November 1).

Springboards to Power

Among the newly elected Central Committee alternate members, Zhuge Yujie (诸葛宇杰) and Shi Guanghui (时光辉) have already reached the level of Deputy Party Secretary in Shanghai and Guizhou Province, respectively. Zhuge (1971) has spent his entire career in Shanghai. After a stint in Shanghai's maritime engineering and port sector, Zhuge was promoted to Director of the General Office of the Shanghai party committee secretariat in March 2017 at just 45 years old. A few months later, he was inducted into the Standing Committee of the Shanghai Party Committee in addition to becoming its secretary-general. In March 2022, Zhuge became one of two Deputy Party Secretaries of Shanghai ([Shandong Commerce Paper](#), May 2; [Dongfang Net](#), March 29).

Shi Guanghui (born 1970) has also spent much of his career in Shanghai, first as an engineer and then as a district-level administrator. He was promoted a vice-mayor of the metropolis in 2013. Five years later, Shi was

transferred to Guizhou and appointed a Standing Committee member of the provincial party committee in charge of law and order. Earlier this year, he was named Deputy Party Secretary of Guizhou ([Gov.cn](#), October 28; [Guizhou Daily](#), April 29). Given that Shanghai has been the traditional springboard to the top echelons of the party, Zhuge and Shi seem to have bright futures ahead.

Most of the new inductees to the alternate list of the Central Committee are heads or vice-heads of the party or administrative apparatuses of provinces and major cities. They include the Party Secretary of Hangzhou Liu Jie (刘捷; born 1970); Vice-Mayor of Beijing Yang Jinbo (杨晋柏; 1973); Party Secretary of Jinan, capital of Shandong Province, Liu Qiang (刘强; 1971); Executive Vice-Chairman of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Huang Zhiqiang (黄志强; 1970); Executive Vice-Governor of Jiangsu Fei Gaoyun (费高云; 1971); Vice-Governor of Fujian Guo Ningning (郭宁宁; 1970); Party Secretary of Xiamen Cui Yonghui (崔永辉; 1970); Party Secretary of Datong, Shanxi Province, Lu Dongliang (李东亮; 1973); Party Secretary of Urumqi Yang Fasen (杨发森; 1971); Party Secretary of Kunming Liu Hongjian (刘洪建; 1973); and Party Secretary of Taiyuan Wei Tao (韦韬; 1970) ([Chongqing Morning Post](#), November 30; [Taiyuan Daily](#), November 22; [People's Daily](#), October 23; [The Paper](#), October 25, 2021).

As the post of Hangzhou party secretary is considered a fast track to the CCP's upper echelons, Liu Jie has received special attention. Liu (born 1970) earned his spurs as an engineer and administrator of a large steel plant in Hunan Province. He was named Director of the Xiang Gang Second Steel Smelting Factory in 2000, when he was only 30 years old. Liu got his big break in 2015 when he was elevated to the Standing Committee of the Jiangxi Provincial Committee in the capacity of its Secretary-General. In 2021, he was named a member of the Zhejiang provincial party committee and concurrently Party Secretary of Hangzhou, the provincial capital ([Hangzhou Daily](#), November 22; [Qq.com](#), November 20). His Zhejiang connection is important given the number of former Zhejiang officials who belong to the predominant Xi Jinping Faction (XJPF).

Several of the newly named 7G Central Committee alternate members are technocrats with training and experience in engineering and the management of metallurgical, electrical and port facilities. Of special note are up-and-comers with banking experience. This seems to reflect the fact that most of China's local-level administrations are heavily indebted because they have been too dependent on income and taxation from the property sector. Leaders with finance experience are given the mandate to reduce debt and to diversify local tax bases ([VOA Chinese](#), July 13; [South China Morning Post](#) [SCMP], November 2, 2021).

Shandong's Liu Qiang and Fujian's Guo Ningning are good examples of financial technocrats who have risen through the ranks. Liu has spent the bulk of his career in banking, rising to become president of the Shanghai Branch of the Agricultural Bank of China and vice-president of the Bank of China (BOC) in the 2010s. Guo, one of the few female 7G stars, has spent most of her career in the BOC. She was previously the head of the BOC's Hong Kong and Singapore branches before being promoted to vice president of the Agriculture Bank of China in 2016. She was parachuted into Fujian as the vice-governor in charge of finance two years later. In

PLA Blows Hot and Cold over U.S. Air Force's Multirole Heavy Aircraft

Derek Solen



(Image: A palletized munitions system falls from the cargo hold of an MC-130J during a live-fire demonstration of Rapid Dragon on November 9, source: Defense Visual Information Distribution)

Introduction

In mid-November, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) published an article evaluating the U.S. Air Force's (USAF) recent efforts to use its heavy aircraft (bombers, tankers, and cargo aircraft) for more missions than they were designed to execute. The article casts doubt on the usefulness and feasibility of these efforts. However, the article was soon followed by another article indicating the threat that is posed by one of these efforts. The glaring contradiction raises the question of which article represents the consensus in the PLA, but in this case, the more alarmist of the two is likely to be closer to the consensus.

Downplaying the Threat

The first article was written by one Liu Haochang ([China National Defense News](#), November 16). The article was published in the International section of *China National Defense News* (中国国防报, *Zhongguo guofang bao*) a sister publication of the *PLA Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central

Military Commission, which is equivalent to the U.S. Defense Department. The audience for *China National Defense News* is the Chinese militia and those working in China's defense establishment outside the PLA and the Chinese People's Armed Police, people involved in conscription, civilian mobilization, and "defense education." Defense education comprises students' mandatory military training as well as the indoctrination of the public in military affairs. It is for this last purpose that *China National Defense News* regularly publishes CCP orthodoxy concerning foreign military affairs in its international section.

The orthodox approach to chronicling foreign military developments usually downplays the efforts of Beijing's enemies and this article is no exception. Given this tendency, it is difficult to determine the degree to which this viewpoint reflects Beijing's actual assessments, but it should not be automatically assumed that the two are inconsistent. Orthodoxy can be self-reinforcing, coloring the views of those with greater access to facts who are writing official assessments as much as it influences the public.

The article was mostly a summary of a single article that was published on the website of the American online magazine *Defense News*, albeit one that accentuated the negative aspects of the USAF's endeavor much more than the original ([Defense News](#), November 7). Liu's article diverged from the article in *Defense News* once he began editorializing toward the end.

As is common practice, Liu quoted unnamed "analysts" to offer a direct response to a remark by the USAF Chief of Staff, General Charles Q. Brown, Jr. The article in *Defense News* quoted General Brown that the ability of a C-130, for example, to carry palletized munitions would complicate an adversary's targeting because the adversary would be unable to determine whether a C-130 is carrying food or missiles ([Defense News](#), November 7). Liu's "analysts" responded by saying that this is "excessively wishful thinking" ([China National Defense News](#), November 16). They reportedly said that because the front and the rear are no longer distinguished in modern warfare, logistical and support nodes as well as lines of communication and transport aircraft are important targets. "To a military with sufficient air defense forces, any enemy military aircraft in the midst of an armed clash is a target for strikes," they apparently remarked.

Liu concluded his article by quoting Americans to support his article's negative assessment of the USAF's endeavor. Liu quoted an executive from L3Harris as saying, "Even if the U.S. Air Force squeezes more utility out of the military aircraft that it currently possesses, this will not help resolve the compositional problem of its fleet of military aircraft" ([China National Defense News](#), November 16). However, this appears to be a translation of an indirect quotation of a remark by Heather Penney of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies ([Defense News](#), November 7). It is possible that Liu intentionally misattributed this remark to the executive in order to create the impression that greater doubt exists about the USAF's endeavor within the U.S. itself.

The likelihood of this possibility increases, when it is considered in relation to Liu's embellishment of the quotation from Penney that he used as the article's final line—what is, in effect, the article's closing argument: "The U.S. Air Force's way of doing things cannot resolve the problem of its fundamental needs[.] Even if it expands the related functions [of its aircraft], the U.S. Air Force will still require more cargo aircraft, bombers, and fighters" ([China National Defense News](#), November 16). The first sentence of this quotation did not appear in the original article ([Defense News](#), November 7). It may have been a paraphrase of the remark that Liu

misattributed to the executive at L3Harris, but if Liu was paraphrasing Penney, he should have noticed his mistake.

Therefore, the message of Liu's article is that the USAF's endeavor to increase the roles of its heavy aircraft is tactically futile and ultimately unfeasible. Such an assessment is overly negative. Certainly, the USAF's endeavor will not resolve the problems of a shrinking and aging fleet, but it should maximize the utility of every existing aircraft and enhance the overall agility of the force. Moreover, Liu's analysts seem to have failed to consider the reality that, even if a military possesses "sufficient" resources, no military possesses unlimited resources. The PLA will likely attempt to prioritize aerial targets to efficiently use its munitions for maximum effect. Hence, the USAF's endeavor is neither futile nor unfeasible. If, however, the PLA truly believes this, then, in the words of Liu's "analysts," it may itself be engaging in wishful thinking.

Sounding the Alarm

The PLA is unlikely to be so optimistic, though. Almost one week after Liu's article appeared, the PLA published another article, which contradicted it. The article was written by one Xi Qizhi and was published in the Science and Technology section of *China National Defense News* ([China National Defense News](#), November 22). The Science and Technology section reports military scientific and technological developments outside China, but unlike the International section, it tends to publish straight news. Xi's article focused on Rapid Dragon, a program to develop one of the aforementioned capabilities, the capability to launch cruise missiles from pallets dropped by cargo aircraft. In early November the USAF conducted the first live-fire demonstration of Rapid Dragon, which was successful ([U.S. Air Force](#), November 14).

Chinese National Defense News previously published an article about Rapid Dragon in its Science and Technology section in November 2021 ([China Aerospace Studies Institute](#), November 10, 2021). That article mentioned positive aspects of Rapid Dragon, but it also raised two critical weaknesses: the scarcity of cargo aircraft in the USAF's inventory and the inadequacies of the missile being used in the program, the AGM-158B, namely its low "cost effectiveness" and its insufficient range. Xi mentioned neither in his article, which in fact, was almost alarmist. The first two-thirds of the article reviewed Rapid Dragon's origin and progress, the speed of which Xi explicitly indicated ([China National Defense News](#), November 22). In the final third of the article, Xi raised three advantages of Rapid Dragon. The first is that cargo aircraft can carry large numbers of missiles. Second, and in direct contradiction to Liu's "analysts," Rapid Dragon will confuse America's enemies:

In a state of war, sorties by transport aircraft far exceed those of bombers, and opponents have difficulty tracking them closely. When a transport aircraft carrying palletized munitions flies to just outside a defensive perimeter and fires stealth cruise missiles, it is generally difficult to detect and discover it. Besides, palletized munitions can also be pre-positioned at forward bases, and after a transport aircraft delivers materiel from the rear to the front, it can undertake a strike mission during its return flight. One can predict that once it is armed with palletized munitions, the agility of the U.S. military's distributed method for strike missions and the suddenness of those strikes will increase immensely ([China National Defense News](#), November 22).

The third advantage of Rapid Dragon is its high "cost effectiveness," which Xi wrote, manifests itself in two ways: first, turning cargo aircraft into bombers is cheaper than developing and maintaining bombers; second,

the U.S. can quickly turn allies' cargo aircraft into bombers, too, "providing [additional] options for deterring opponents" ([China National Defense News](#), November 22). Xi predicted that there will be increasingly more types of palletized munitions and that more types of aircraft will be able to carry them in the future.

Conclusion

The contrast between Xi's and Liu's articles is striking and naturally raises the question as to which viewpoint represents the consensus in the PLA. In this case, it is likely that Xi's article is closer to the consensus. After all, it is unlikely that the articles represent a drastic evolution of the PLA's view, certainly not within one week. Instead, it is more likely that the articles' composition and publication were not coordinated by the authors and the editors of the newspaper's different sections. Working separately, they accomplished the purposes of each section: one to inform and one to indoctrinate. In this case, given that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Liu fabricated quotations, it is likely that Liu knowingly painted a picture of the USAF's endeavor that is more negative than even he knows is warranted.

Therefore, although it would be wrong to conclude that the consensus in the PLA is always the opposite of the views that are presented in *China National Defense News'* International section, in this case, the PLA likely regards Rapid Dragon in particular as a credible threat. The PLA is likely to regard the seriousness of that threat as significantly greater if Rapid Dragon is shared with American allies, a possibility that the PLA likely fears now that Tokyo is poised to include the development of the capability to attack "enemy bases" in its defense strategy ([Mainichi Shimbun](#), December 9). In addition to increasing the total number of cargo aircraft that China's enemies could use as "weapons trucks," it would also increase the vectors from which threats come.

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The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway and the Future of the Belt and Road Initiative

William Yuan Yee



(Image: An aerial photo of a trial run of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway in November, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

On the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo watched over a video livestream as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway (HSR) sped through its first trial run between Tegalluar Station and Casting Yard No. 4 ([Antara](#), November 21). Yet the smiles plastered across the faces of the two world leaders belied the fraught, winding journey of the railway until this point, as well as the uncertainties surrounding its future.

Upon completion, the 142-kilometer (88 mile) railway will connect Indonesia’s current capital city, Jakarta, with its fourth largest city, Bandung. Chinese state media has called it one of the “flagship” projects of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure development strategy widely viewed as the signature foreign policy project of Xi Jinping’s administration ([Xinhua](#), November 16). After all, it was in a speech in Jakarta in 2013 that Xi first unveiled one of the BRI’s cornerstone development programs to bolster infrastructure connectivity—the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road ([ASEAN-China Centre](#), October 2, 2013).

The Jakarta-Bandung line will be the first high-speed railway in Southeast Asia with a designated speed of 350 kilometers (217 miles) per hour, reducing the average commute time between both cities from 3 hours to 40 minutes ([Global Times](#), November 16). However, the railway has experienced recurrent delays and cost overruns due to permit issues, environmental concerns, labor shortages, and funding disputes. In order to understand the future of the HSR, it is instructive to understand the history of the railway project. In addition, the fate of the HSR will likely affect the future of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The History of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway

In September 2015, the Indonesian government awarded the contract for a \$6 billion Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail to a group of Chinese and domestic state-owned enterprises ([In the Dragon's Shadow](#), September 22, 2020). This collective entity, known as PT Kereta Cepta Indonesia-China (PT KCIC), is 60 percent owned by a group of Indonesian state enterprises and 40 percent owned by China Railway International Group, which is a subsidiary of the state-owned conglomerate, China Railway Group Limited ([Xinhua](#), November 16). A \$4.5 billion loan from Beijing's state-owned China Development Bank (CDB) funded the project, which Jokowi has pledged to pay back over a 40-year period at an annual interest rate of 2 percent to the CDB by 2067 ([Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative](#), December 18, 2020).

However, China's state-owned enterprise did not win the contract without a contest. Initially, a consortium of Japanese firms seemed destined to secure the project, particularly since Japan had already conducted a three-year feasibility study of the Jakarta-Bandung line between 2011 and 2014 ([Developmental Railpolitics](#), December 2018). However, the Japanese offer demanded a guarantee from the Indonesian government for 50 percent of the loan to be repaid in 40 years, while the Chinese bid required no guarantee at all. While the Japanese loan was cheaper at an annual interest rate of 0.1 percent, it also carried significantly higher risk, so the Indonesian government selected the more attractive Chinese bid ([Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative](#), December 18, 2020). In January 2016, Jokowi himself led the groundbreaking ceremony to announce the start of construction on the railway, which was set to open in 2019 ([South China Morning Post](#), February 19, 2016). The ceremony took place even before governmental permits had been issued, signaling the Indonesian president's eagerness to complete the project.

In spite of the early optimism surrounding the project, the HSR's timeline was rapidly derailed by issues related to land acquisition, environmental impacts and labor shortages due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From the start, some of the land acquired for the project was not located on the route for the railway tracks but within industrial and residential areas, so Indonesia's National Land Agency could not issue the permits ([Tribunnews](#), March 16, 2018). As a result, actual construction did not start until May 2018, over two years after Jokowi's much-vaunted opening ceremony ([The Jakarta Post](#), April 5, 2018). Environmental concerns later arose: activists from the Indonesian Forum for Living Environment protested against the railway, arguing that its construction had been greenlit without a proper sustainability assessment and would require evicting over 2,300 households ([The Jakarta Post](#), January 25, 2016). Erecting tunnels for the line has also damaged rice fields and irrigation canals in towns like West Java's Purwakarta, endangering the food security of its residents ([Liputan 6](#), October 15, 2021). The onslaught of COVID-19 further disrupted progress, as the government was forced to suspend construction on the railway during the pandemic's early months ([The Jakarta Post](#), April 15, 2020).

Despite the initial delays, progress on building the railway now seems to be on the right track. In October, Jokowi announced that “88.8 percent” of the construction has been completed ([KONTAN](#), October 13). In a government readout, Jokowi expressed “hope” that the Jakarta-Bandung HSR would complete its testing by the end of this year and commence full operations in June 2023 ([Xinhua](#), November 17; [Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia](#), January 17).

That said, the unexpectedly exorbitant costs of the project present another issue altogether. While the initial price tag of the railway was estimated at \$6.07 billion, that number has now reached nearly \$8 billion ([Bisnis Indonesia](#), October 15, 2021). Construction delays increased operating costs, and the difficult land acquisition process required relocating several industrial and commercial areas, which was expensive ([Tempo](#), September 1, 2021). The consortium PT KCIC estimates the railway’s cost overrun to be nearly \$1.5 billion, but China disputes this figure and believes it to be \$982 million ([Voice of Indonesia](#), November 10; [The Jakarta Post](#), October 19). The subject is a matter of ongoing negotiation between the Chinese and Indonesian governments.

The forthcoming relocation of Indonesia’s capital city from Jakarta to Nusantara, a planned region in the province of East Kalimantan, poses additional challenges to the Indonesian government’s ability to repay its loans to Beijing by diminishing its estimated revenue streams from the project. A 2017 feasibility study review estimated the break-even point at 26 years, assuming a daily passenger volume of 61,000 ([Nikkei Asia](#), February 20). PT KCIC now projects that 31,000 passengers per day will use the line, accounting for the likely relocation of 1.5 million civil servants and their families to Nusantara, which means the government will require 40 years to break even on its railway investment ([Kompas](#), March 2).

What the Jakarta-Bandung HSR Means for the Future of BRI

The extent to which obstacles in completing “flagship” BRI projects like the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway will affect the future of Xi’s signature foreign policy initiative remains an open question. Last year, Xi acknowledged that the international environment for BRI was becoming “increasingly complex” and stressed the importance of strengthening “risk prevention” ([China Daily](#), November 20, 2021). In his recent address to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Bangkok, Thailand, Xi said that Beijing would “consider” holding a third Belt and Road Forum in 2023, after its previous iterations in 2017 and 2019 ([Xinhua](#), November 18). It is notable that Xi did not directly announce the hosting of another forum. Xi’s remarks in Bangkok may have been a trial balloon to evaluate the potential interest of other countries in attending, particularly as opposition in BRI host member states mounts over concerns about inflated costs, corruption and rising debts ([AidData](#), September 2021). As another potential sign of Xi’s decreased confidence in the project, the BRI did not appear in the foreign policy section of the 20th Party Congress work report as it had previously ([Xinhua](#), October 25). Instead, the report transferred its treatment of the BRI to the section on China’s economic development and achievements over the past five years.

Of late, Beijing has certainly scaled back the amount and pace of its billion-dollar loans to support Belt and Road projects across the developing world. Chinese loans to Africa plunged by 77 percent from \$8.2 billion to \$1.9 billion from 2019 to 2020 ([BU Global Development Policy Center](#), accessed November 24). Overall, Beijing’s loans to lower-middle-income nations decreased by 58 percent to just \$13.9 billion in 2020, down from

its record high rates of overseas lending in 2018 ([Nikkei Asia](#), September 20). China's slowing economy provides one rationale for this shift.

Still, a broader question—highlighted by the Jakarta-Bandung HSR—that will determine the future trajectory of the BRI is whether such projects can truly serve as a “win-win” for both Beijing and the host country. If Chinese-financed infrastructure in developing countries cannot generate sufficient revenues to secure returns on their sizable investments and pay back the hefty loans, this might decrease the overall interest of BRI host countries in its projects. A flagship project like the HSR is no exception.

Conclusion

“China’s march outward, like its domestic development, is probing and experimental, a learning process marked by frequent adjustment,” academics Deborah Brautigam and Meg Rithmire previously wrote ([The Atlantic](#), February 6, 2021). In many respects, the experience of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway exemplifies this reality. While construction on the line might soon be completed, other challenges will remain: ticket prices that strike a balance between affordability for Indonesian citizens and engendering sufficient government profits, particularly with the looming relocation of the capital city to Nusantara; continued government investments to ensure proper maintenance and upkeep; negotiations between Beijing and Jakarta on an agreed-upon amount and mechanism to pay for the billions of dollars in overrun costs.

Resolving the issues related to the HSR will not be an insurmountable task. Jokowi and Xi share a close personal relationship, and both governments are committed to ensuring the railway’s success ([China Brief](#), November 3; [Antara](#), July 25). In fact, it speaks volumes that both leaders set aside time to specifically spotlight the project during the G20 summit in Bali, which focused on an array of global challenges such as the war in Ukraine, volatility in currency exchange rates, soaring inflation, food security and climate change.

Nevertheless, for Beijing, ensuring the continued viability and attractiveness of the Belt and Road Initiative will require demonstrating more than that the Jakarta-Bandung railway did not fail. As one of the BRI’s flagship projects in Southeast Asia’s largest economy and the de facto leader of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the railway must showcase to other countries worldwide that it truly can be a “win-win” for both sides.

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An International Lifeline: Taiwan's Parliamentary Outreach

Rup Narayan Das



*(Image: President Tsai Ing-wen meets with a bipartisan delegation of members of the U.S. House of Representatives in October, **source:** Taiwan Presidential Office)*

Introduction

For decades, China has made systematic efforts to internationally isolate Taiwan through a mix of coercion and diplomatic enticement. Taiwan, however, has broken through this isolation by engaging with other nations through robust parliamentary diplomacy in order to expand its international space and legitimacy. It is indeed an irony of contemporary history that although Taiwan fulfills the main requisites for statehood, such as territory, population and an effective governance structure, it is deprived of its rightful place in the community of nations multilaterally and also bilaterally at the behest of China.

Most countries' "One China" policies and state-to-state relationships with China preclude them from engaging in official interaction with Taipei, but the trend of parliamentary outreach between Taiwan and the rest of the world is gaining momentum. Such interactions provide opportunities for Taiwanese parliamentarians to interface with their counterparts from abroad, particularly with fellow democratic countries with which Taiwan lacks formal diplomatic relations. Moreover, these delegations have created something of an informal

international parliamentary fraternity in support of Taiwan, which underscores a broader groundswell of goodwill in the international community. This article surveys some notable recent interactions in Taiwan's expanding parliamentary diplomacy with the U.S. and other fellow democracies.

U.S. Tops Parliamentary Exchanges with Taiwan

The interface between lawmakers from the U.S. and Taiwan is the most extensive and high-profile exchange undertaken by members of the Legislative Yuan. The most notable parliamentary exchange was the visit by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi this past August, which induced a sharp response from China with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) staging several days of large scale, live-fire exercises in the Taiwan Straits ([United Daily News](#), August 3; [China Brief](#), October 4). The rationale for Pelosi and other members of Congress to visit Taiwan is justified as Congressional approval is required for arms sales to Taiwan as laid out in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) ([U.S. Congress](#)).

The TRA stipulates that "the President and the Congress shall determine the nature and quantum of such defense articles and services based solely upon their judgment of the needs of Taiwan, in accordance with procedures established by law." As a result, within this framework, Congress is a key custodian of U.S. defense cooperation with Taiwan. This role was further entrenched in 2018, when the U.S. Congress unanimously passed the Taiwan Travel Act, which was signed into law by then U.S. President Donald Trump ([U.S. Congress](#)). This legislation encourages visits by officials from the two sides at all levels and notably included cabinet-level officials, who at the time of the legislation's passage had not traveled to Taiwan since the normalization of relations with the PRC in 1979. The passage of the Taiwan Travel Act underscores the strong support for Taiwan across the executive and legislative branches of the US government.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which prompted increased speculation over a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan, particularly after the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the two-way exchanges of lawmakers between the US and Taiwan received additional traction. A Taiwanese Parliamentary delegation led by Kuomintang (KMT) Legislator Johnny Chiang, convenor of the legislature's Diplomacy and National Defence Committee, visited Washington at the end of June ([BCC News Network \[Taiwan\]](#), July 24). The delegation also included KMT legislators Hung Mong-kai, Yeh Yu-lan and Wu Sz-huai ([Focus Taiwan](#), June 29). The delegation met with U.S. Representative Mario Diaz Balart, co-chair of the Congressional Taiwan Caucus, and discussed issues pertaining to regional security and negotiations regarding the Taiwan-US Initiative on 21st-century trade. Chiang said the purpose of the visit was to "represent the voice" of the legislature and Taiwanese, including by building support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations. During the tenure of Chiang and incumbent KMT chairman Eric Chu, the party has sought to boost its image as a "pro-U.S." party that is committed to defending the cross-straits status quo. On June 8, the KMT reopened its liaison office in Washington, which had been closed since 2008 ([Taipei Times](#), June 20).

A cross-party delegation from the legislative Yuan led by KMT Legislator Charles Chen visited Capitol Hill in September. The seven-member delegation included KMT legislators Sandy Yeh, Jessica Chen, and Chang Yu-mei, as well as Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) legislator Mark Ho, among others. The delegation met with U.S. Representative Mark Takano. The Democratic congressman, who chairs the Veteran's Affairs Committee, opined that cross-strait dialogue could help lower tensions in the Asia-Pacific region. U.S.

Representative Don Beyer, who has previously visited Taiwan, told the visiting lawmakers that Taiwan and the U.S. should strengthen trade, and expressed the hope that a Taiwan-US bilateral free trade agreement could become the first trade pact signed by U.S. President Joseph Biden during his tenure ([Taipei Times](#), September 17).

The Taiwanese lawmakers visited at a time when the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed the Taiwan Policy Act. Similarly, lawmakers from both parties have regularly visited Taiwan to convey U.S. support. Republican Senator Rick Scott visited Taiwan in early July and met with President Tsai Ing-wen. He said that as a member of the US Senate committee on armed services and commerce, he remains committed to the freedoms and security of Taiwan and urged that the international community continue working together to ensure Taiwan is well-positioned to defend its freedom, referring to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Echoing this sentiment, President Tsai Ing-wen said: "Taiwan will continue to work with the U.S. to jointly safeguard the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region" ([Taipei Times](#), July 9).

A bipartisan delegation led by Democratic congresswoman Stephanie Murphy comprising eight US representatives, met with President Tsai Ing-wen on September 6 to express support for Taiwan ([President of Taiwan](#), September 8). Murphy is the vice-chair of the U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations. Murphy told Tsai that the US-Taiwan relationship still grows and flourishes more than 40 years after the TRA took effect in 1979, adding that opportunities for closer cooperation and coordination across trade, security, and cultural exchanges have also increased ([Taipei Times](#), September 9). Shortly after this delegation's visit, another bipartisan group of lawmakers led by U.S. Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson visited Taiwan and met with President Tsai on October 13 ([Taipei Times](#), October 14). Ms. Johnson, who is a Democratic lawmaker from Texas, is the chair of the U.S. House of Representatives Science, Space and Technology Committee. She reiterated that the U.S. commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific is "stronger than ever," adding that the US-Taiwan relationship was essential to American national and economic security. She mentioned, in particular, a plan by Global Wafers Co., a Taiwanese company, to invest \$5 billion to build a plant in Sherman City, Texas, which will create an estimated 1,500 jobs. Four other US Representatives: Democrats Seth Moulton and Kai Kahele, and Republicans Brad Wenstrup and Michael Waltz, also joined this mid-October congressional delegation to Taiwan.

Parliamentary Outreach with Other Partners

In addition to the U.S., extensive interaction has also recently occurred between lawmakers in Taiwan and their counterparts in other democratic countries. In July, a four-member parliamentary delegation from Japan led by the former Minister of Defence Shigeru Ishiba visited Taiwan and met with President Tsai Ing-wen ([Japan Times](#), July 28). Ishiba, who led the Ministry of Defence from 2007 to 2008, said that Japan had responsibility for the stability of the Asia-Pacific region ([Taipei Times](#), July 2022). In August, DPP legislators Kuo Kuo-wen, Mark Ho, Michelle Lin, Lin Ching-yi, Chang Hung-In and Chang Lio Wan-Chien visited Japan to pay their respects to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was assassinated during an election campaign speech for his party in July.

A group of Taiwanese legislators visited Canada in late July during the Legislative Yuan recess. The group was led by DPP legislator Chiu Chih-wei and included Hsu Chih-chieh and Chung Chia-pin, also belonging to

the DPP. A major objective of the visit was to lobby for Taiwan's inclusion in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Chung noted that although no Taiwanese legislators have visited Canada in recent years, "now is a good time, as Canada is getting closer to Taiwan" ([Taipei Times](#), July 27). A cross-party delegation led by Canadian lawmaker Judy Sgro attended Taiwan's Double Ten National Day celebrations in Taipei this year. The Chinese embassy in Canada reacted strongly through a statement that the visit led by Sgro blatantly violated the one-China principle and "grossly interferes in China's internal affairs" ([Taipei Times](#), October 17). The Embassy statement also stressed that China would "continue to take resolute and strong measures to defend its national sovereignty and oppose the interference by external forces in China's internal affairs." Sgro responded by saying that pressure from China would not prevent her and other lawmakers from visiting Taiwan. Significantly, in September, Canadian naval vessels recently transited the Taiwan Strait to help uphold peace and stability in the region ([Focus Taiwan](#), September 21).

The overlapping interests of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan and European parliaments are equally pronounced, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first parliamentary delegation from Germany to visit Taiwan after the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 was in early October, after Nancy Pelosi's visit. A seven-member parliamentary delegation led by German-Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Group Chairman Klaus-Peter Willsch arrived in Taiwan in early October. The delegation met with President Tsai, who thanked Germany, which holds the rotating G7 Presidency this year, for overseeing the issuance of the joint statement by G7 leaders and foreign ministers expressing concern for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Tsai further said that at the World Health Assembly in May this year, Germany for the first time expressed its clear support for Taiwan's participation as an observer ([Taipei Times](#), October 4). Ahead of the WHA meeting, which held its 75th session in Geneva, a number of Parliaments passed resolutions supporting Taiwan's bid for observer status at the WHA. The German parliament, the Bundestag, unanimously passed a resolution urging Taiwan to participate in WHO activities. The resolution urged the German government to advocate for Taiwan's participation in the WHA and allied agencies. It also called upon the government to report to the Bundestag regularly about its efforts to support Taiwan's participation in WHO activities ([Taipei Times](#), May 21).

A group of Taiwanese legislators led by Legislative Yuan speaker You Si-kun visited France in July and met with the French Senate in Paris ([Liberty Times](#), June 30). The French senators expressed hope that economic and trade cooperation with Taiwan's semiconductor industry was poised to increase ([Focus Taiwan](#), July 28). In early September, a group of French lawmakers led by Senator Cyril Pellevat visited Taiwan after China conducted huge military exercises in response to Pelosi's visit. The delegation, the fourth in the past year, underlines the growing strategic synergy between Taiwan and France ([Taipei Times](#), September 9).

In Taipei's parliamentary outreach, the Czech Republic, which like Taiwan is a vanguard of democracy hailed for the 1968 Prague Spring and the 1989 Velvet Revolution, occupies a special position. No wonder, therefore, when the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan Speaker You Si-kun visited Prague on his trip to Europe this July, a first for the Legislative Yuan, he described his visit as a pilgrim of sorts to the "Mecca of democracy." In his address to the Czech Senate, You urged democratic countries around the world to "understand the core ideas of Chinese Communist Party and to enact preventive measures against its spread, or it could, soon, bring about irreparable disaster for the human race." He further said: "one can say, for certain, that safeguarding Taiwan is in the public interest of the world" ([Taipei Times](#), July 17). When it was made public, Beijing reacted strongly to You's visit. The PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office claimed that the purpose of Taiwan's parliamentary diplomacy

was to gain the support of external forces for Taiwanese independence. Ma Yiaoguang, spokesperson for China's Taiwan Affairs Office, accused You of being a "diehard Independence element "who sneaks around" other countries and engages in parliamentary diplomacy in order to win over external anti-China forces to pursue Taiwan independence ([Taiwan News](#), June 22).

Support from the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China

Going beyond the parliamentary support at the bilateral level, Taiwan now also enjoys the multilateral support of parliamentarians through the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), which held its annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in mid-September. More than 60 parliamentarians from across the world from different countries attended this year's event, which at its conclusion passed a communiqué without objection. Among other issues, the communiqué condemned China's military exercises around Taiwan and its coercive military threats. It called on countries worldwide to oppose China's tactics in the Strait, to promote state visits to Taiwan and to upgrade the status of the country's missions abroad. It also called for Taiwan's meaningful participation in the WHO, the International Civil Aviation Organization, Interpol, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and their respective international covenants and organizations. The current members of IPAC include cross-party legislators from the European Parliament, the US, the UK, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Italy, Australia, Italy, Japan, Lithuania and Ukraine, among others ([Taipei Times](#), September 16).

Conclusion

The intensification of bilateral and multilateral parliamentary exchanges with Taiwan suggests the increasing erosion of China's "One China" principle as more and more countries defy its writ by recognizing Taiwan's de-facto status as an independent and sovereign country, which deserves its rightful place in the community of nations. Not only did Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a constitutional leader in the U.S. Government, visit Taiwan, but so have other high-level foreign dignitaries such as the British minister of State for Trade Policy Greg Hands and Franziska Bratner, the German Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal level visited Taiwan in November and concluded agreements defying China's much vaunted "one China principle" ([Nikkei Asia](#), November 10). Countries have started to revisit and revise their "one China policies," emphasizing that China's "one China principle" is not the same as the "one China policy" adopted by most countries that have diplomatic relations with Beijing.

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