



VOLUME 22 • ISSUE 22 • DECEMBER 8, 2022

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Keep Calm and Carry On: Xi Jinping Takes a Page from the Book of Jiang Zemin

John S. Van Oudenaren

On November 30, with mass protests only recently suppressed in Beijing and Shanghai and still simmering in Guangzhou and Chongqing, state media notified the “whole party, army and country” that former General Secretary Jiang Zemin, who led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from mid-1989 to 2002, had died at age 96 ([Xinhuanet](#), November 30; [8world](#), December 1). On December 1, Jiang’s remains were transported from Shanghai to Beijing, where a delegation, led by General Secretary Xi Jinping, comprising current and former senior Party leaders greeted the plane upon its arrival at Xijiao Airport ([Xinhua](#), December 2). Banners at the airport read “Eternal glory to Comrade Jiang Zemin!” and the waiting officials wore black armbands and white flowers on their breasts. In the days to come, public life was dominated by eulogies to the “core” of the CCP’s third generation leadership, who was lauded by state media as “an outstanding leader with high prestige, a great Marxist, a great proletarian revolutionist, statesman, military strategist, and diplomat” ([People’s Daily](#), December 2; [Xinwen Lianbo](#), December 6). During the week-long mourning period for Jiang, text and graphics for everything from newspapers to fast food menus were printed in grayscale ([Twitter](#), December 1). The timing

of Jiang's death was striking as it occurred amidst the largest public pushback against CCP rule since the student protest movement in spring 1989, which culminated in the June 3-4 Tiananmen Square massacre that preceded his assumption of CCP leadership at the 13th Central Committee's Fourth Plenum that same month ([China Brief](#), November 28).



(Image: Xi Jinping and other top current and former CCP officials at the sendoff for Comrade Jiang before his cremation at the PLA General Hospital in Beijing on December 5, source: Xinhuanet)

In his remarks at the official memorial service for Jiang on December 6, Xi extolled his forebear for guiding the CCP through an “extremely complicated situation at home and abroad” at tumultuous juncture in June 1989. ([Xinhuanet](#), December 6). With this praise, Xi credited Jiang for not only consolidating the crackdown on dissent following the June 4 Tiananmen Square incident, but also for guiding the People's Republic of China (PRC) through a particularly challenging international environment in the early 1990s largely defined by Western-imposed economic isolation and the collapse of the Communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which was viewed as an existential threat in CCP ranks. [1]

By lauding Jiang for sustaining Marxism-Leninism in China through the end of the Cold War, Xi is also likely seeking to cast his own consolidation of power at the recently concluded 20th Party Congress and suppressing of the recent “white paper revolution” (白纸革命, *bai zhi geming*) protests through a mix of intimidation and inducement in a favorable light ([rfi](#), December 4; [China Brief](#), October 24). Moreover, Xi likely also sought to portray himself as carrying on Jiang's approach, which entailed a mix of selective pragmatism on economic policy with firm commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology. On the latter point, just as Jiang never contravened the orthodox view held by CCP hardliners foreign forces seeking to facilitate China's “peaceful evolution” away from Marxist-Leninism to political liberalism and market capitalism were behind Tiananmen, under Xi, the Political-Legal apparatus and the security services have also detected a foreign hand at play in recent protests

([National Bureau of Asian Research](#), December 1, 1990). Although Xi has made tacit concessions in response to pressure from the protests, relaxing zero-COVID restrictions in large metropolises, his administration has actively promoted the narrative that “hostile foreign forces” seeking to orchestrate a “color revolution” are behind the protests ([VOA Chinese](#), December 6; [Xinhuanet](#), November 29;

A Show of Elite Unity

In a final irony, in death, Jiang received the sort of adulation he was seldom accorded in the final decade of his life, which for the former Party boss was largely dominated by the internecine rivalry between his “Shanghai Gang” and Xi’s emergent, but increasingly dominant faction. As Willy-Wo-Lap Lam noted last fall, Xi’s recent crackdown on both the tech sector and the long-running “anti-corruption” campaign/purge targeting the political-legal (政法, *zhengfa*) system which oversees all legal enforcement authorities including police, was aimed at rooting out Jiang’s allies in these sectors. Those targeted in the financial sector included associates of Jiang’s right hand man, former Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member and Vice President Zeng Qinghong. In addition, Xi has sought to remove allies of former Security Czar Zhou Yongkang, also a member of Jiang’s clique who was purged and sentenced to lifetime imprisonment in 2015, from the police forces and legal system ([China Brief](#), October 14, 2021).

Despite the long running factional rivalry between Xi and Jiang, every effort was taken during the organization and holding of Jiang’s funeral to project a strong façade of unity among Party leadership ([CCTV](#), December 6). The official organizing committee for Jiang’s funeral was led by Xi, but also included Hu Jintao, who some believed was on the outs due to his unexpected exit from the closing ceremony of the 20th Party Congress last month. Members of the funeral committee also included many of Jiang’s longtime political allies including Zeng Qinghong, his former Premier Zhu Rongji and former National People’s Congress Chairman Wu Bangguo ([Xinhuanet](#), November 30). Projecting an image of unity among Party elites at Jiang’s funeral was particularly important in the context of the recent protests, which authorities were able to subdue more easily than the Tiananmen Square movement, not only because of China’s expansive internal security apparatuses, but also because there were no overt fissures among ruling elites as there were in the late 1980s when reformers and conservatives were locked in a legitimate struggle for power (with Deng Xiaoping the key bellwether). As a result, although Jiang’s funeral has evoked considerable nostalgia in China, it was not able to serve as a rallying symbol for protesters as the death of reformist leader Hu Yaobang was in April 1989. [2]

From “Peaceful Evolution” to “Color Revolution”

Throughout its history, the CCP has sought to frame popular pushback against its monopoly on political power as a product of foreign, almost always Western intervention, which seeks to infiltrate and undermine its political system through the promotion of “universal values” such as democracy and free speech. During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, CCP officials repeatedly expressed concerns that the U.S. and its allies sought to orchestrate China’s “peaceful evolution” (和平演变, *heping yanbian*) from Communism to capitalism and political liberalism.

For Jiang, the conservatives' obsession with the threat of "peaceful evolution" due to Tiananmen and the Soviet Union's collapse was a major impediment to furthering economic reform and development, which required engagement with the outside world to succeed. In order to create space for Jiang to pursue economic development, Deng inserted himself into the political discourse by providing political cover for a series of editorials in *Jiefang Daily* (解放日报), the official paper of the Shanghai Committee of the CCP, under the collective penname "皇甫平" (*huangfu ping*). The articles laid the groundwork for Deng's famous 1992 "Southern Tour" by promoting "reform and opening up" as "socialist reform" rather than foreign-induced "peaceful evolution" and bourgeois liberalization ([Chronicles of China](#), 2003). In effect, Deng helped create political space for Jiang to accelerate economic reforms heading through the 14th Central Committee meeting in 1992 without being tarred as "China's Gorbachev." At the same time that he pursued economic reform, Jiang was ruthless in rooting out any potential opposition. As Sarah Cook has noted, a decade after the Tiananmen crackdown, he launched a sweeping and ruthless campaign to eradicate the "Falun Gong, a spiritual and meditation discipline practiced in the late 1990s by tens of millions of Chinese citizens, but which was abruptly banned in 1999" after Jiang determined the movement threatened the party's hold on power ([China Brief](#), February 1, 2019).

In his meeting with European Union Council President Charles Michel last week, Xi reportedly acknowledged, albeit implicitly, that the Zero-COVID policy has played a role in spurring protests. He told the EU leader that the demonstrators were "mainly students" who are "frustrated" after three years of pandemic life ([South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), December 2). Nevertheless, CCP authorities have largely stuck by the narrative, which has been roundly rejected by the protesters themselves, that "hostile foreign forces" are driving the "white paper movement. On November 29, at a meeting of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission (CPLC), the top body for legal enforcement, CPLC Secretary General and recently appointed Politburo member Chen Wenqing, who also serves as Minister of State Security, emphasized the need to "resolutely crack down" on infiltration and sabotage by hostile [i.e., foreign] forces in accordance with the law, resolutely crush illegal and criminal acts that disrupt social order" ([Xinhuanet](#), November 29).

Last week, Hong Kong Secretary for Security, Chris Tang Ping-keung stated that some of the commemorations of the Urumqi fire (the initial trigger for zero-COVID protests) held in the city contained the embryonic elements of a "color revolution" (颜色革命, *yanse geming*) ([Zaobao](#), November 30). Tang noted that some of the individuals involved had joined the "black storm" (mass protests), which struck Hong Kong in 2019, joined the recent "white paper protests. He stressed the need for vigilance as these kinds of "anti-China" elements and their ilk are "determined to endanger national security.

Conclusion

Little love was lost between Xi and Jiang. However, despite initial speculation that it might engender further protests, Jiang's death could not have come at a better time for Xi. Indeed, Xi looks set to take a page from the book of Comrade Jiang: when facing internal unrest and external uncertainty, keep calm and carry on. However, the big question is if Xi can execute the same sort of balancing act that Jiang carried off following the Tiananmen Square massacre in very different international and domestic circumstances.

All CCP leaders deal with the challenge of striving to remain connected and open enough to the outside world to sustain China's economic development while simultaneously maintaining near total political and ideological control. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi has emphasized the latter over the former, but as the recently extensive rollback of the zero-COVID policy indicates, he may now be seeking to restore some equilibrium between control and development ([PRC National Health Commission](#), December 7). Nevertheless, both Xi's attributes as a leader and the presently very different geopolitical circumstances suggest this will be a tougher act for him to pull off than Jiang. While Xi can be engaging and personable with foreign interlocutors, he lacks the kind of eccentric charisma that Jiang used to both win over and assuage the concerns of foreigners with regards to China's rise. Finally, although Jiang also dealt with Western frustration and anger toward China following Tiananmen, threat perceptions of China, particularly in the U.S., have massively increased in the intervening three decades. Consequently, while Xi may find Jiang's playbook useful to draw on, he will not find all the solutions he seeks there.

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[1] For a comprehensive examination of how the CCP sought to navigate the collapse of the Soviet Union, see David Shambaugh, [China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation](#) (University of California Press, Apr 2, 2008).

[2] For an example of nostalgia for the Jiang era in China see this video ([bilibili](#), July 19, 2021) of Chinese people in 1995 making optimistic predictions about their country's future has been widely shared and circulated on social media this week, although it predates Jiang's death.

Will Mass Protests Force Xi to Change Course on Zero-COVID?

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Students at Southwest Jiaotong University in Chengdu, Sichuan, hold a vigil for the November 24 Urumqi fire, source: Wikipedia)

Introduction

The apparent failure by Beijing to determine new ways to handle the COVID-19 pandemic given what many consider the largest mass protest since the student movement of 1989 has exposed the limited abilities of the new Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership to handle unexpected events despite its extensive security and surveillance apparatus. CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, who gained near-total control of the party apparatus at the 20th Party Congress late last month, is nowhere to be seen after tens of thousands of students on at least 50 campuses in a dozen-odd cities staged protests against the three-year-long pandemic-related lockdowns on Sunday, November 27. Crowds on the streets of cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu and Urumqi also held impromptu demonstrations ([Chinese New York Times](#), November 28; [Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), November 28).

The protestors demanded not only an end to Xi's signature "zero tolerance" COVID regime but also called for the introduction of universal values banned by the party, such as personal liberty, freedom of expression and

the rule of law. Some demonstrators even shouted incendiary slogans such as “CCP, step down” (共产党下台, *Gongchandang xiatai*) and “Xi Jinping, step down” (习近平下台, *Xi Jinping xiatai*) ([Liberty Times](#), November 28). Many held aloft pieces of white paper, which simultaneously symbolized press censorship in China and the fact that their protests had nothing to do with “color revolutions” supposedly spread by “hostile foreign forces” ([Radio French International](#), November 27; [Voice of America](#), November 27).

Breaking Point?

The acts of dissent that erupted spontaneously over the weekend in reaction to the horrendous fire that broke out in a high-rise apartment building last Thursday, November 24, in Urumqi, the heavily guarded capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where a seamless lockdown had been underway for over 100 days. Up to 40 Uighurs and Han Chinese reportedly died in a fire, which turned particularly serious because the building was allegedly sealed off due to lockdown measures. As a result, residents were trapped inside the building and could not escape. Due to pandemic-related barricades in nearby streets, fire engines reportedly took a long time to arrive at the scene. The official death toll was ten, but numerous social media posts claimed up to 40 casualties from the fire ([HK01.com](#), November 27; [Radio French International](#), November 26).

Earlier confrontations between locked-down residents and the police had taken place in Guangdong, Hubei, and Henan Provinces, including protests in Zhengzhou, Henan at the Taiwan-owned Foxconn Factory, which is the world’s largest assembler of iPhones ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), November 23; [China News](#), November 23). The protesters, however, realized that while they had vented their long-suppressed views about the party-state’s handling of the pandemic, their crusade might not lead to major political changes. “We are still a long way from democracy,” the BBC quoted a Beijing demonstrator as saying in a video on the latest developments. “We do not have a program of action. But at least we have ensured that people in many places in China have come out to air their views” ([BBC Chinese Video](#), November 28).

Xi’s Dilemma

So far, neither General Secretary Xi nor any of the other six newly selected members of the Politburo Standing Committee have appeared in the media or addressed the public on the possibility of shifting away from strict mass lockdowns and adopting a more flexible epidemic prevention approach.

On November 11, the State Council announced a “20-point liberalization” package, limiting the extent and intensity of lockdowns, particularly in non-infected districts in urban areas. However, this dispensation was largely ignored by local officials who feared losing their jobs for being found insufficiently zealous in enforcing stringent zero-COVID measures ([PRC National Health Commission \(NHC\)](#), November 26; [Gov.cn](#), November 12).

Xi and his advisors face an acute dilemma. While a continuation of the harsh, three-year-long zero-COVID regime would precipitate more protests, the number of daily new cases surged past 40,000 as of Sunday and any relaxation could further accelerate the spread of the virus ([NHC](#), November 28). So far, the only Politburo

member who has spoken out on the situation is Xinjiang Party Secretary Ma Xingrui, who has doubled down on the necessity of following Beijing's instructions "with bigger work efforts and speedier action" ([People's Daily](#), November 26). The *People's Daily* and other official media have given no hints of any potential changes to existing measures.

Sources known to *China Brief* said the party's Central Military Commission had deployed more People's Armed Police and soldiers to big cities as well as to Xinjiang and Tibet. However, police and military personnel have been ordered to act with restraint on a selective basis and to minimize the number of arrests of residents or students. On November 27, the Vice-Party Secretary of Tsinghua University Guo Yong met with the protestors and promised that nobody would be punished. Moreover, free railway tickets have been offered to students who want to return home early for the Lunar New Year holiday ([Ming Pao](#), November 28).

Numerous doctors and medical professionals have suggested various methods the Chinese government could take to alleviate its current public health predicament. Many have laid the blame on China's home-made Covid vaccine, which is deemed to be much less effective than mRNA shots developed in the U.S. and the U.K. Ironically, beginning last month, foreigners living in China have been given the choice of domestically manufactured or foreign-made vaccines ([South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), November 4; [BBC Chinese](#), July 13, 2021).

Moreover, authorities have been slow in publishing figures for COVID-stricken patients who have either died or gone to hospital intensive care units. Many netizens have blamed CCP leadership for being afraid that the low death figures resulting from the less potent Omicron variants would be used by "anti-government elements" to advocate the "do nothing" approach to the epidemic now adopted by most Western and Asian countries.

A conspiracy theory has also taken hold that local-level officials have been given instructions that *fangcang* (or "mobile cabin") make-shift quarantine hospitals that various cities have built to isolate infected patients will remain in operation for up to five more years or longer, meaning that no end to Beijing's harsh zero-COVID measures is imminent ([Qz.com](#), May 11). One point of view even holds that maintaining the whole architecture of the zero-COVID apparatus, including vaccine manufacturing and frequent nucleic acid tests, has become a multi-billion-yuan business and that corrupt local cadres are primed to benefit financially from the continuation of the policy ([New York Times Chinese](#), February 21).

At the same time, however, the Xi leadership, which is exceedingly nervous about GDP growth rates, must weigh the heavy economic toll that the lockdown policy has exacted on the economy. China's economy officially expanded by a mere 3.9 percent in this year's third quarter, while unofficial estimates put the figure as low as 2 percent to 3 percent (National Bureau of Statistics, October 24; [Jingdaily](#), October 27).

Conclusion

At this stage, the Xi administration probably realizes that the longer the pandemic persists, it will continue to drag down consumer spending and disrupt logistical supply chains. As a result, multinational corporations will also increasingly hesitate to start or increase production in China or source from Chinese firms. Furthermore,

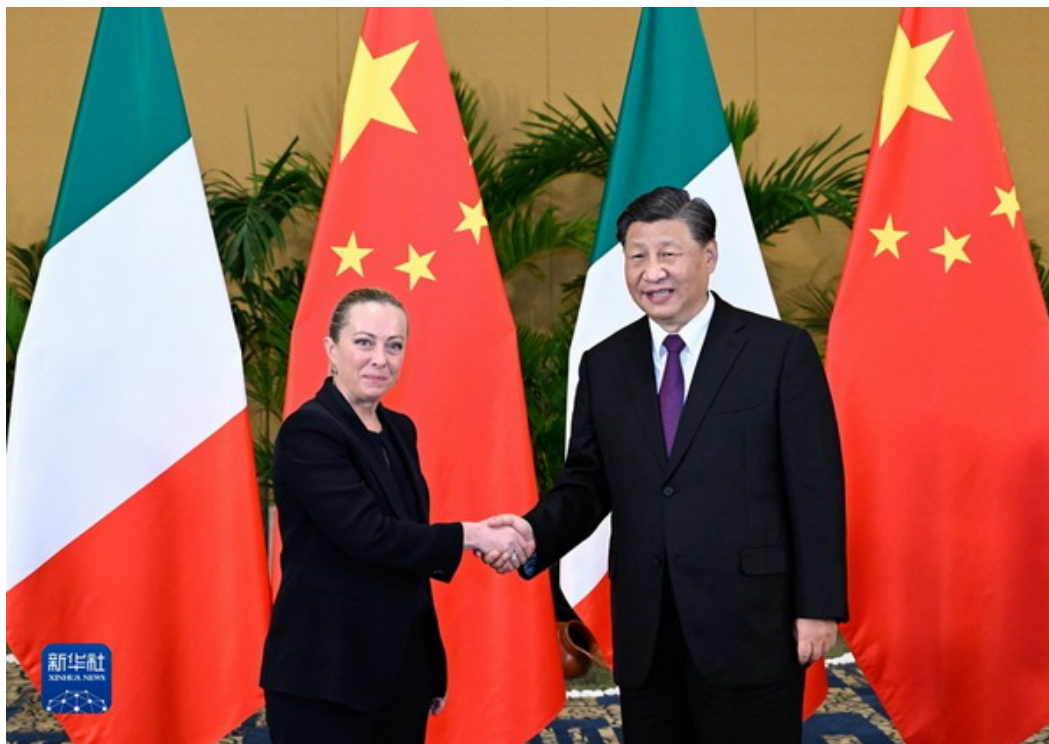
the economy's lackluster performance so far this year has proven that relying principally on injections of government stimulus through infrastructure spending is no longer a panacea for growth ([SCMP](#), June 7).

Xi will probably not swallow his pride and make massive purchases of more effective U.S. or European-made vaccines. Yet, the claims of the CCP's propaganda machinery that the China model is inherently much better than the Western model in solving public health problems have been exposed as an embarrassing overstretch. And although it is unlikely that the pandemic-related protests might last for more than a fortnight or so, the fact that so many citizens and students dared to risk being arrested by freely expressing their convictions could translate into pressure on the party to make changes not only in COVID-related measures but to other aspects of the system as well.

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Meloni at the Helm: What Does Italy's New Government Mean for Sino-Italian Relations?

Andrew R. Novo



(Image: Italian Prime Minister Georgina Meloni shakes hands with President Xi Jinping during their meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Indonesia last month, **source:** Xinhua)

Introduction

Questions about the unity of Italy's new government on several key foreign policy issues persist, ranging from the extent of its support for Ukraine to its commitment to various European Union institutions. However, on the issue of China, the new government of Prime Minister (PM) Giorgia Meloni appears united. This bodes well for transatlantic cooperation and could spell trouble for Beijing, which not too long ago entertained ideas of using Italy as a friendly counterweight in Europe. Under Meloni, Italian foreign policy, particularly toward China, is unlikely to chart a dramatically new course. This is largely because the current government has prioritized its commitment to NATO and needs to focus on domestic issues rather than risk upsetting the international arena. While openings remain for Sino-Italian cooperation in economic terms, such cooperation will be geared toward supporting Italy's domestic challenges and is unlikely to provide Beijing with the significant foothold that it has long hoped to gain in Europe.

Summit Signals

Since assuming office in October, Italy's new prime minister has been busy. In November, she traveled to Bali, Indonesia to participate in the G20 Summit. Meloni had a cordial meeting with President Xi Jinping, which touched on issues of trade, tourism, and cultural exchange ([PRC Foreign Ministry \[FMRPC\]](#), November 17). Xi stressed his hope for the two sides to tap into the China-Italy Government Committee and dialogue mechanisms across sectors to explore potential cooperation in areas such as high-end manufacturing, clean energy, aviation and aerospace and in third-party markets. China is also looking to a "high-level" opening-up of ties and has announced its intention to import more quality products from Italy. Meloni accepted an invitation to visit China, while Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed his hopes that China's relationship with Italy and the EU more broadly would not be negatively influenced by third parties, i.e., the U.S. ([South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), November 22). However, pleasantries and promises are all well and good during such international summits; they are par for the course. Bromides about bilateral cooperation and partnership ricochet around such events just like the champagne, but their substance is open to debate.

A day after meeting so amiably with Xi, Meloni met with the leaders of Canada, India and Australia. None of these countries is particularly popular with Beijing these days. She tweeted about Italy's "long-standing friendship and deep relationship of trade and cooperation" with Australia, the "unexpressed growth potential" of "bilateral relations" with India, and her desire to "strengthen bilateral relations" with Canada, whose prime minister, Justin Trudeau was rather roughly dressed down by Xi for putative leaks to the press ([Giorgia Meloni Twitter](#), November 16). Notably, however, Meloni did not highlight her meeting with Xi on Twitter. It is possible to read too much into both the prime minister's order of bilateral meetings and China's absence from her Twitter feed, but the contrast would suggest that while Sino-Italian relations are cordial, there is no desire on the part of Meloni or her coalition to go back to the policies of the Five Star Movement.

Misplaced Hopes

Under PM Giuseppe Conte of the Five Star Movement, Italy became the first (and only) G-7 country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ([China Brief](#), April 24). During President Xi's March 2019 state visit to Italy, the two countries put pen to paper on a Memorandum of Understanding to jointly advance the construction of the BRI ([Xinhua](#), March 23, 2019). Through the agreement, Beijing hoped to deepen economic and political ties with Italy and increase its influence in Europe through Italy. For Italy, the premise behind the agreement was to leverage Chinese capital in order to improve infrastructure and trade between the two nations in an attempt to jumpstart its perennially moribund economy. Ideologically, Conte and his Five Star allies, had a neutral to positive attitude toward China, which was appreciated and shared by Beijing. Chinese state media, for example, widely disseminated Xi's extensive response to a question from Conte about the challenges of governing China, wherein Xi discusses how he developed an attitude of "selflessness" in service of the Chinese people ([CCTV](#), October 6, 2021).

In partnering with Beijing, however, Conte's populist and inexperienced Five Star Movement miscalculated dramatically. Before any real progress on the partnership could be made, deteriorating U.S.-China relations, increased European skepticism about Chinese influence, and the enormous global fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic stopped the progress of the MOU in its tracks. Over time, little Chinese investment in Italy materialized. What investment there was faced opposition over fears concerning intellectual property or had

been in the pipeline before the 2019 agreement. Due to COVID, trade declined dramatically. Ironically, the 2019 signing ceremony was something of a high-water mark. In the end, the much-touted partnership brought criticism of the Conte government domestically and internationally and delivered little in practical economic benefit.

Course Correction

Conte left office in February 2021, pushed out after a no-confidence vote due to disagreements over his handling of a number of economic issues, including the country's COVID-19 recovery program. He was replaced by the former head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, who quickly and decisively pushed back against his predecessor's flirtation with China. He made use of these "golden powers" numerous times, blocking, for example, the sale of a majority stake in a major Italian semiconductor company, LPE, to a Chinese investment company (Asia Financial, April 10, 2021). During the first half of 2022, Draghi also expanded the capacity of the government to manage the takeover of key Italian sectors by foreign corporations, further shielding Italian industry and intellectual property from Chinese acquisitions ([Decode 39](#), April 19).

While praised by many world leaders for his pragmatic and Atlanticist approach, Draghi's domestic position was always tenuous. Without the support of a political party, the new prime minister's status as a technocratic leader was always going to have a short lifespan within the fractious world of Italian politics. The election that followed his resignation brought Meloni to power as part of a coalition of right and center-right parties.

Superficially, Meloni is the antithesis of Draghi. She is 45; he is 75. She is a populist; he is a technocrat. She put "country" at the heart of her campaign slogan—"God, country, and family," while he spent most of his career with international organizations, the World Bank and the European Central Bank. Draghi, an academic, an economist, a banker, and a civil servant, was foreign to politics. Meloni began her political career at age 15 and was elected to parliament at 29. In spite of these glaring differences, there are similarities between the two leaders. On the international front, Meloni's instincts, like Draghi's, lean toward the West. Like Draghi, she is not pro-China. Although she campaigned as an "outsider," Meloni has a long pedigree of deep involvement in traditional Italian politics. Acknowledging the dual challenge that Russia and China pose to the current international system, Meloni openly declared that, under her government, Italy would not be "the weak link" in the Western alliance ([Italian Post](#), October 20).

In the context of discussing the Russia-Ukraine war, Meloni's measured statements about using politics and diplomacy to avoid military conflict over Taiwan was met with predictable criticism from Beijing. But Meloni has gone further, meeting with Taiwan's representative in Italy, tweeting about standing "alongside those who believe in the values of freedom and democracy," and voicing her desire to deepen cooperation between Italy and Taiwan across a number of sectors, from tourism to semi-conductors ([Focus Taiwan](#), September 23; [Giorgia Meloni Twitter](#), July 26). She has criticized the 2019 MOU with China and said that, at present, she would see no need to renew it ([Taipei Times](#), September 27).

Meloni's critical line toward China is reflected in the composition of her cabinet, which has expressed fears of developing a dependence on China. Deputy PM Matteo Salvini recently tweeted his opposition to European proposals to outlaw petrol, diesel and methane on the continent from 2035 on, saying that it was "a gift to

China,” which would close factories and shops in Italy and Europe, deprive workers of wages and create a “dependence on China for life” ([Matteo Salvini Twitter](#), October 28). Adolfo Urso, the new minister for economic development, criticized the German government for allowing China’s COSCO to buy a stake in Hamburg’s port. Urso argued that his government would work to avoid replacing dependence on Russian energy with “technological or to some extent commercial dependence on China” ([The BI](#), October 31) Urso’s comments neatly encapsulate the attitude of the Italian government in the post-Ukraine war world. His refusal to deliver “Italy into the hands of the Chinese,” is also significant.

While these statements of the new Italian government’s intent in the international arena are important, they do not represent the most significant challenge facing Meloni. Her party came to power as candidates of change in a country that faces numerous domestic challenges. Domestic challenges: high energy prices, high unemployment, budget deficits, low economic growth, migration, and unlocking the EU’s COVID aid and economic recovery package are what brought Meloni to power and they are what will likely preoccupy her time in office. Such domestic issues can be exacerbated by international conditions and China can exert some influence on these issues in Italy, but it is unlikely that China’s influence alone will be decisive.

Conclusion

Painfully aware of the way energy, trade, and technology can be used as political leverage, the new Italian government, like governments around the world, is taking a cautious approach to its interaction with China. On the one hand, China has an enormous market and is also a potential source of much needed capital. However, at the same time, Beijing has demonstrated how it can use trade and commercial connections as leverage. China’s recent spat and economic sanctions targeting Lithuania provide a vivid demonstration of how China is willing to leverage its economic heft as a political tool ([China Brief](#), January 28).

Perhaps from those examples and from the experience of the war in Ukraine, European political leaders have learned important lessons that will shape their policies, at least over the short term. In the meantime, the durability of Meloni’s coalition is by no means secure. Although critical of the bureaucracy in Brussels, she remains committed to the values of democracy, freedom and political plurality. She has also expressed robust and unwavering support for transatlantic relations.

In the short term, this signals that Italian foreign policy is likely to distance itself from China and to reassert its position at the heart of Europe and the Western alliance. China will have to look for new partners in the EU to influence European politics and is likely to do so. Given the tenuous position of Europe’s economy, there will undoubtedly be interested suitors, but for now, at least, they will not be in Rome.

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The 20th Central Military Commission: Personnel and Priorities

Amrita Jash



(Image: Xi Jinping leads the other six members of the Central Military Commission (CMC) on an inspection of the CMC joint operations command center on November 8, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

“Security” was the operative word in General Secretary Xi Jinping’s opening report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) this October. Xi stressed that the Party has stood firm against “external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade and exert maximum pressure” on China promising not to yield to external, “coercive power” and to safeguard the nation’s “dignity and core interests” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China](#) [FMPRC], October 25). Furthermore, in upholding the ‘Party’s goal of “building a strong military in the new era,” Xi declared that China’s armed forces have “become a much more modern and capable fighting force, and the Chinese path to building a strong military is growing ever broader” ([FMPRC](#), October 25). In this light, Xi’s report to the 20th Party Congress offers insights into the aims and objectives for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) under the 20th Central Committee over the next five years, foremost of which are two key imperatives. First, the PLA must abide by complete “loyalty” to the Party and second, it must never cease striving to become a “strong military.”

These directives will shape the efforts of the newly appointed 20th Central Military Commission (CMC) during Xi’s third term as Party Chief and CMC Chairman as well as the Commander-in-Chief of the CMC’s Joint Operations Center since 2016. After the conclusion of the 20th Party Congress, Xi and the other six CMC members inspected the Joint Operations Center on November 8. In his remarks, Xi set the ground rules for the PLA by stating that “the entire military should devote all its energy to and carry out all its work for combat readiness, enhance its capability to fight and win, and effectively fulfill its missions and tasks in the new era”

([Xinhuanet](#), November 8). Xi also demanded that the armed forces implement “the Party’s thinking on strengthening the military for the new era, follow the military strategy for the new era and adhere to combat effectiveness as the sole criterion” ([Global Times](#), November 9).

Some Old, Some New PLA Leadership

Apart from changes to the political leadership, the Party Congress is also pivotal in reorganizing the Chinese military leadership—the CMC. In China, the CMC, the highest military operational and decision-making body at the PLA’s helm, controls China’s domestic security forces and the People’s Armed Police (PAP). This critical aspect makes the composition of the CMC significant.

On October 23, the new CMC lineup was formally announced at the first plenary session of the 20th CCP Central Committee ([FMPRC](#), October 23). The CMC continues to be comprised of seven members: Xi Jinping as Chairman; Zhang Youxia and He Weidong as Vice Chairmen; and Li Shangfu, Liu Zhenli, Miao Hua, and Zhang Shengmin as members ([Xinhuanet](#), October 24).

Table 1: 20th CMC Members

Name	CMC Appointment (Order of Rank)	Service	Members of the 19th CMC
Xi Jinping	Chairman	-	Yes
Zhang Youxia	Vice Chairman	PLA Army	Yes
He Weidong	Vice Chairman	PLA Army	No
Li Shangfu	Member Title: Head of Equipment Development Department of the CMC; to be the next Minister of National Defense	PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF)	No
Liu Zhenli	Member Title: Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the CMC	PLA Army	No
Miao Hua	Member Title: Director of Political Work of the CMC	PLA Navy (PLAN)	Yes
Zhang Shengmin	Member Title: Head of Discipline and Inspection of the CMC	PLA Rocket Force (PLARF)	Yes

A number of aspects of the new CMC lineup are notable. The PLA Army enjoys renewed dominance in its representation on the supreme military body with Army General and Eastern Theater Commander General He Weidong replacing retiring PLA Air Force (PLAAF) General Xu Qiliang as a vice chairman (VC) ([Xinhua](#), October 23). As a result, the PLAAF is no longer represented on the CMC. In addition, the military personnel who were promoted possess experience in military equipment and defense science and technology. Both Zhang Youxia and Li Shangfu have served as directors of the Equipment Development Department ([Xinhuanet](#), March 18, 2018; [China Daily](#), September 19, 2017). Finally, despite neither being from the Army, Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin rose through the ranks as political commissars, demonstrating the importance that Xi places on ensuring the PLA maintains internal discipline and remains on the correct ideological course ([Xuexi Juntuan](#), January 22; [PLA Daily](#), January 20).

Having close personal ties and displaying loyalty to Xi appears to have been another important qualification for promotion or retention on the 20th CMC. For Xi, this was clearly a prime motivator in keeping General Zhang Youxia on as a CMC VC at age 72 in contravention of the Party's unofficial retirement age of 68 for Politburo members. Of the six members, Xi retained three members from the 19th Party Congress. Striking a balance in the 3:3 ratio, Xi has drawn on a mix of "old" and "new" loyalists ([China Brief](#), November 3). For instance, unlike VC Zhang Youxia, who is an old hand, He Weidong, prior to being appointed as VC, had no experience on either the CMC or the CCP Central Committee.

Operational experience and battlefield readiness have also been key to Xi's calculus in determining the personnel composition of the CMC, in particular the selection of the two VC positions. General Zhang, who moves up from the second to the first ranked VC role, is one of the few PLA officers with direct combat experience, having served in both the China-Vietnam 1979 war and the subsequent border clashes between China and Vietnam in the 1980s, including participation in the Battle of Laoshan in 1984 ([The Paper](#), March 3, 2016). In addition, General Liu Zhenli, who was recently selected to head the Joint Staff Department, following a stint as Commander of the Army, also gained combat experience in the China-Vietnam border conflicts of the 1980s ([South China Morning Post](#), October 13). In addition, the appointment of General He Weidong as a VC is significant as he served as the former commander of the Eastern Theatre Command (ETC) that oversees Taiwan and the East China Sea; and he is also reported to have planned the military exercises around Taiwan in response to U.S. House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August. In addition, He Weidong also served as Deputy Commander of the Western Theatre Command (WTC) and was Commander of the WTC Army. The WTC oversees operational jurisdiction over China's borders with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Myanmar. Therefore, the military experience with Taiwan and India was pivotal in Xi's selection of General He.

A 'To-Do' List for China's Armed Forces

On October 24, in his first military meeting since the conclusion of the 20th Party Congress, Xi Jinping categorically outlined the "immediate tasks" for the PLA by stating that: "members of the armed forces must uphold the main theme of the congress, carefully read the report to the 20th CPC National Congress and the new Party Constitution, research the thoughts, perspectives, strategies, and measures included in those documents, and align their minds and deeds with the Party" ([China Military Online](#), October 25). These imperatives highlight that, unlike other countries, Chinese armed forces are ultimately a Party force and therefore, the "gun" must always be controlled by the Party."

The 20th Party Congress seeks to set the PLA on its path to establish three key milestones. The first is meeting the centenary benchmark of ensuring the PLA is on track with its military modernization program in 2027; achieving the basic realization of PLA modernization by 2035, and completing the development of a world-class military by mid-century ([PLA Daily](#), November 5). These goals have become the strategic prerequisites for making China a modernized and socialist nation. In his first military meeting after the conclusion of the Party Congress, Xi posited that the central mission for the PLA lies in achieving these goals in the "coming five years" and that it "must spare no effort to meet these goals by 2027" ([China Military Online](#), October 25). In order to achieve this objective, the PLA must: apply the thinking on strengthening the military for the new era; implement

the military strategy for the new era; and maintain the “Party’s absolute leadership over the people’s armed forces” ([FMPRC](#), October 25).

It is noteworthy that, in the guidelines for the PLA set forth by Xi in the 20th Party Congress report, allegiance towards the Party precedes troop training and combat preparedness. On the ideological front, the report calls for the PLA to enhance building political loyalty towards the Party, ensure allegiance to the Party’s command, adopt the current CCP theory as espoused by Xi and strengthen Party organizations within the military. In terms of operational aspects, the guidelines emphasize the need for the PLA to develop its combat readiness, strategic deterrence, and joint operation capabilities, among others. This prioritization proves that being “red” over “expert” is more important in today’s PLA. Following up on the 20th Party Congress, the CMC issued a guideline on the “study, publicity, and implementation of the guiding principles” of the 20th National Congress of the CCP in the military ([People’s Daily Online](#), November 7). This is now regarded as the primary political task of the Party, the country, and the armed forces for the present and for some time to come ([China Brief](#), November 18).

Conclusion

Now that Xi has a new CMC in place and has instructed the PLA with strict guidelines, he will accelerate efforts in his third term to build a strong military. For Xi, this entails a force that is both loyal to himself and the party, as well as prepared for warfighting. Therefore, it is worth watching if the new CMC, on matters where China’s “core interests,” such as Taiwan or the border dispute with India, are concerned, will continue with an approach premised primarily on coercion or whether it will instead show an increased proclivity for the direct use of military force.

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Predicting China's Next Foreign Minister: Key Factors and Policy Implications

Chihwei Yu and K. Tristan Tang



(Image: PRC Ambassador to the U.S. Qin Gang plays a Chinese language word game with American students in Texas, source: Xinhua)

Introduction

At the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th Party Congress in late October, five diplomats were selected as full Central Committee members, one of whom will be appointed as China's next foreign minister (FM) at the National People's Congress (NPC) next March ([Xinhuanet](#), October 22; [China Daily](#), March 19, 2018). [1] The FM is responsible for executing Chinese foreign policy as laid out by the core leader. Although, the FM is usually only a Central Committee member and not on the Politburo, the position still plays an important role in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) policy-making process. As top leaders provide only a broad, general direction for foreign policy, the foreign ministry must implement and determine policy specifics. In this process, the FM has some latitude to make modest adjustments and therefore, influence policy outcomes.

In considering the FM's role in Chinese foreign policymaking, it is important to note that the senior-most diplomatic position in the PRC system is the Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office, a role, held by Yang Jiechi since 2013, which FM Wang Yi, who was just appointed to the new Politburo, is likely to assume ([Xinhuanet](#), October 23). In addition to the Foreign Ministry, which is a state body under the purview of the State Council, numerous other state and party organs, including the CCP's International Liaison

Department, play a role in shaping Chinese foreign policy. Nevertheless, the Foreign Ministry is still the primary organ for foreign policy implementation through its day-to-day management of diplomacy. Consequently, as our research indicates, Chinese leaders likely value a broader range of qualifications when selecting an FM in comparison to other top ministerial-level posts. In addition to the traditional promotion criteria of age, experience and personal relations, we observe that FM candidates' expertise, their experience serving as a vice foreign minister and the core leader's relative pragmatism on foreign affairs, are largely unrecognized, but nevertheless important factors that impact the selection process. Based on these factors, current Deputy Director of the National Security Commission Office Liu Haixing and Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Qin Gang are the top candidates to become China's next foreign minister ([PRC Embassy in the U.S.](#), July 28, 2021; [The Paper](#), March 14, 2018). The final choice will offer some key clues as to the PRC's approach to foreign policy over the coming half-decade.

Key Selection Criteria

Ordinarily, the primary prerequisites for official promotions in the PRC are age, experience and personal relations. However, these factors alone cannot explain the turnover of senior officials in the FM role over the past several decades. For example, prior to his promotion to become FM in 1998, Tang Jiaxuan had not served abroad as an ambassador, which rendered him far less experienced than other senior diplomats ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), May 28). Moreover, Wang Guangya, who was then director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, did not become the foreign minister in 2013, even though as the son-in-law of late Vice Premier Chen Yi, he was among the most prominent princelings ([China Daily](#), September 30, 2007). The incidents highlight that there are clearly some unique qualifications for the role of FM, which differentiate it from other minister positions.

Two important, but largely overlooked factors influencing FM selection are the level of pragmatism exercised by the top leadership and the chosen official's legitimacy. Due to the profound impact of foreign affairs on China's interests, the supreme leader ultimately chooses the FM.

In choosing an FM, leaders first determine their foreign policy prerogatives and then select a senior diplomat who can best execute their objectives. The core leader sometimes even orchestrates broader personnel reshuffles in order to ensure their chosen candidate is politically in line to lead the foreign ministry.

As foreign affairs are vital to the PRC, top Chinese leaders must employ pragmatism, rather than unrealistic ideas, in order to avoid any accident or incident that could detrimentally affect China's interests and its leadership's political capital. [2] Hence, Chinese leaders are more likely to choose the most suitable and competent diplomat available to execute their foreign policy.

Maintaining workable relations with the U.S. and Japan are longstanding objectives of the PRC's foreign policy. Both countries have a major impact on the PRC's economic and security interests, but relations can be complicated by strong popular nationalism, which often sours Chinese public opinion toward these countries. As a result, since the start of economic reform and opening up, Beijing has sought to use diplomacy to sustain manageable relations with the U.S. and Japan. The importance of these relationships is reflected by the fact that many foreign ministers have come into the position with experience serving as Beijing's Ambassador to

either Washington or Tokyo. Such experience is valuable in enabling the FM to draw on relationships with senior American and Japanese officials, build mutual trust and develop greater understanding of these key foreign countries' polities.

Even when the top leader has decided on their preferred candidate for FM, they still must ensure that the chosen official has the domestic legitimacy necessary to represent the foreign ministry within the bureaucracy. Consequently, successful FM candidates must also possess traditional promotion qualifications of age, experience and personal relations. As a result, ministerial-level diplomats or vice foreign ministers are prime FM candidates. The former group of officials are at the same level as the foreign minister and outrank most of the other diplomats in the foreign ministry. On the other hand, there are dozens of vice minister-level diplomats including vice ministers of other departments and some ambassadors. As vice minister-level positions in the foreign ministry are limited, some diplomats transfer to other bureaucracies in order to become minister-level officials. Such moves are often regarded as losing the competition among diplomats, making them inferior to those who still serve in the foreign ministry and, therefore, not entitled to pursue the role of FM.

As for ambassadors, their role is to boost bilateral relations, while vice foreign ministers manage multiple issues and, consequently, accumulate similar experience to that of the FM, who is responsible for overseeing the entire ministry. Accordingly, those who have served as vice foreign ministers, especially those currently at this rank, are the top candidates for the minister among all vice minister-level diplomats.

Trends in Personnel Arrangements Since 1991

Excluding the disarray in personnel arrangements before the 1990s caused by the Cultural Revolution and its aftereffects, the pragmatism of Chinese top leaders and the legitimacy of the selected official are the main factors influencing the promotion patterns of PRC FMs and other top foreign ministry officials over the past 30 years.

Due to the vital security and economic interests, Chinese leaders' choice of new foreign ministers has been influenced by the ebbs and flows of U.S.-China and Japan-China relations. While Japan-China relations went sour due to the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands and other issues before the change of FM in 1998 and 2013, respectively, U.S.-China relations became the top priority prior to the new appointment of FM in 2003 and 2007 due to the 2001 Hainan Island incident and the 2008 Summer Olympics. It is worth noting that then top leader Hu Jintao selected a new FM in 2007, right before the 17th Party Congress. Given that it was the first time for China to hold the Olympics representing Chinese national pride and the status of a major power in the world, China's top leader would want to avoid any diplomatic problem that could impact the event's success. At that time, U.S. and China were dealing with some vital issues—the North Korea nuclear situation and risk of Taiwanese independence—that could easily derail bilateral relations. Consequently, at such junctures, Chinese leaders opted for a diplomat with the needed expertise as FM to manage or ease tensions in key bilateral relationships. In order to ensure that such promotions are justifiable internally, the chosen diplomat must be the most qualified among those on the shortlist. Since 1991, Tang Jiaxuan, Li Zhaoxing, Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi were appointed PRC FMs because they were the most qualified diplomats at the times of their selections (see *table one*).

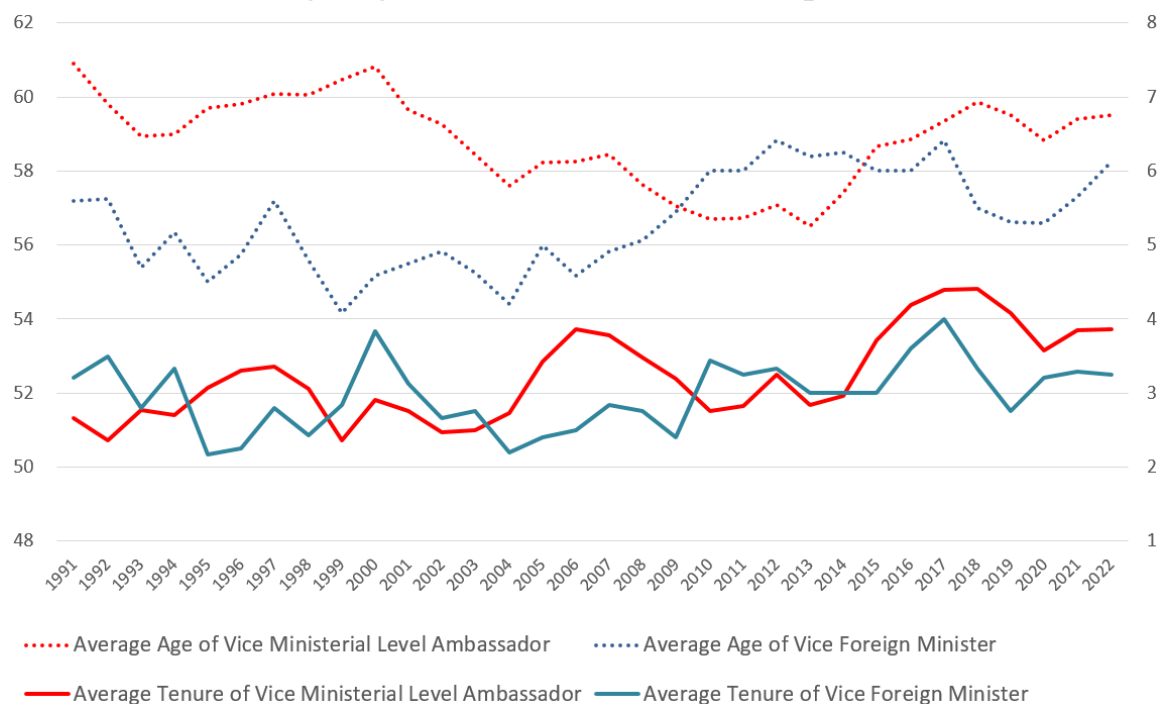
Table One: Potential Nominees for Chinese Foreign Ministers since 1991

Year	Name	Age	Experience	Legitimacy Concerns
1997	Xu Dunxin	63	Embassy Minister to Japan	Xu was too old to be promoted to the minister level.
	Tang Jiaxuan	59		
2002	Li Zhaoxing	62	Ambassador to U.S.	Yang was too young to be the foreign minister.
	Yang Jiechi	52		
2006	Zhou Wenzhong	61	Ambassador to U.S.	Yang had served as a vice minister-level official longer than the others.
	Yang Jiechi	56		
	Liu Xiaoming	50	Embassy Minister to U.S.	
2012	Cui Tiankai	60	Ambassador to Japan	Wang was the only minister-level official among them.
	Wang Yi	59		
	Cheng Yonghua	58		

However, except for current FM Wang Yi, none of the FM appointees were the most senior or experienced among all Chinese diplomats at the time of their appointments. However, Chinese leaders circumvented this by limiting the candidate pool to ensure the legitimacy of their promotions. For example, if the Chinese top leaders choose a FM with a relative lack of experience or seniority, such as Tang Jiaxuan in 1998 and Yang Jiechi in 2007, senior ambassadors would stay in their posts longer than average tenure and then retire.

Moreover, as 62-year-old Li Zhaoxing was too old to be promoted to the minister under normal conditions, senior vice foreign ministers younger than Li were appointed as ambassadors, rendering Li a top choice in the ministry. These deliberate personnel arrangements can be observed by the irregular trend of average age and service tenure before the appointment of new FM in 1998, 2003 and 2007. For instance, the irregular personnel reshuffle involving Li is underscored by the sharp descent in the average vice minister-level ambassadors' tenure from 2000–2003 (see below chart).

Table Two: Average Age and Tenure of Senior Diplomats: 1991-Present [3]



In Wang Yi's case, he was the most qualified diplomat at time of his promotion to the FM role. It is, however, worth noting that 61-year-old Wang Guangya, who was then director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs office—might have been 59-year-old Wang Yi's main competitor for the role ([FMPRC](#)). Both were minister-level diplomats and prominent princelings, meaning their credentials were almost identical. However, as Wang Guangya had not served in Japan and Wang Yi had successfully defused the tension between the two countries during his tenure as ambassador in Tokyo, it is reasonable to assume that this boosted Wang Yi's candidacy to assume the role of FM.

The Logic of Diplomatic Personnel Arrangements in the Xi Era

Although preserving China's vital security and economic interests remains critical to the PRC's foreign policy, Xi's pragmatism on foreign affairs has differed from his predecessors since economic reforms got underway. In order to consolidate his political capital in an effort to convince political elites and the public of his commitment to strengthen China, Xi has emphasized protecting China's interests and prestige through fierce diplomatic struggle. During the 4th press conference for the 20th party congress, Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu concluded that vigorously safeguarding China's national sovereignty was Xi's signature achievement in foreign affairs since 2012 ([Xinhua](#), October 21).

With the abolition of Chinese presidential term limits in 2018, Xi further consolidated his power and could start enforcing his will with far less interference than in the past. At that time, Wang Yi was already 65 and would

have had to retire had he not been promoted to the state councilor or another high-level state position. Since both U.S.-China and Japan-China relations remained positive in 2017, Xi could choose a diplomat with either U.S. or Japanese experience as the next foreign minister. However, Xi still needed an FM capable of crisis management because of his determination (at least ostensibly) to preserve China's interests at all costs. Given that Wang Yi had abundant experience in crisis management, including his successful handling of Japan-China relations in his first term as foreign minister, retaining him was crucial for Xi, particularly as the international environment became more challenging for the PRC. Hence, Xi decided to let Wang have a second term as foreign minister by promoting him to the role of state councilor.

In order to justify Wang's extended tenure, Xi studiously prolonged ambassadors' terms and promoted diplomats with neither U.S. nor Japanese experience as vice foreign ministers. For instance, instead of choosing younger diplomats for key posts in Washington and Tokyo, both China's Ambassador to the U.S. Cui Tiankai and Ambassador to Japan Cheng Yonghua were stationed in their respective positions for over five years, despite being too old for future consideration for promotion to FM ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[MFA\]](#)). Furthermore, senior Vice Foreign Minister Li Baodong and Liu Zhenmin were the ambassadors to the UN and Wang Chao, who served most of the time in the commerce ministry until his transfer to the foreign ministry in 2013, was not a career diplomat, and hence, not qualified for promotion to FM. As a result, Wang Yi was the most eligible senior diplomat to be the foreign minister then.

Even cronyism, a vital factor for promotion in the Xi era, has not applied to the appointment of the FM. While the senior diplomats serving in the office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC) are usually regarded as Xi's confidants, none of these officials were favored for promotion to FM in 2018. Ye Dabo, Le Yucheng, Song Tao and Kong Quan, all of whom had not been posted to U.S. or Japan as senior diplomats, served as CFAC deputies prior to 2018, ([The Paper](#), August 24, 2018; [FMPRC](#); [Xinhua](#), November 26, 2015; [The Paper](#), June 3, 2016). Even though Kong Quan and Song Tao were promoted to ministerial level positions in 2015, the former retired in 2018 and the latter did so in 2022 ([Xinhua](#), March 16, 2018; [Xinhua](#), June 3).

Conclusion

Based on the cases of the former Chinese foreign ministers and the global situation at the time of their selection, we posit that the level of core leadership pragmatism and FM candidates' legitimacy are crucial to choosing China's foreign minister.

Since 2018, U.S.-China relations have soured due to disputes over trade, technology, Taiwan and others issues, forcing China to accelerate negotiations on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with the EU in order to ease international pressure on the Chinese economy, particularly the technology sector. Although both sides reached a consensus on CAI in late 2020, China announced sanctions on designated European countries' officials due to their criticisms of Chinese human rights and EU sanctions against Chinese officials, which led to the CAI being halted by the EU Parliament ([Xinhua](#), March 22, 2021; [Xinhua](#), December 30, 2020). As the Biden administration has not ceased to treat China primarily as a strategic competitor, boosting EU-China relations may prove to be a vital task for Chinese foreign policy in Xi's third term.

All in all, it is highly possible that loosening or even dissolving the counter-China coalition led by U.S. is Xi's current Chinese foreign policy goal. Improving EU-China relations would be a crucial component of any such effort ([FMPRC](#), May 28). Given the recent tendency of U.S.-China relations and the attitudes of Chinese officials, it might be impossible to improve bilateral ties dramatically, so discreetly managing possible foreign challenges and engaging with the EU to promote European neutrality in the in U.S.-China competition appear vital. Such policy objectives may explain why Wang Yi was just promoted to the Politburo following the 20th party congress as Xi still needs a highly-experienced official to coordinate departments involved in foreign policy and their implementation. While 72-year-old Yang Jiechi is the most seasoned and senior diplomat, he could not be promoted any further and will have to retire.

According to the factors of the top Chinese leader's level of pragmatism and the FM candidates' political legitimacy, Liu Haixing and Qin Gang have the greatest chances to become the next FM. Interestingly, Liu has been tapped to serve as vice foreign minister, while Qin Gang could soon be transferred back to the foreign ministry from Washington as a minister-level official based on the precedent of Zhang Yesui after the 18th party congress ([CNA](#), May 30; [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC](#)).

The final decision on who to name FM will provide key indicators on Xi's foreign policy goals, whether they are to promote EU-China relations in order to weather a fierce geopolitical struggle with the U.S. or rather, to seek to maintain surface harmony with the U.S. Should Xi opt for the former route, Liu Haixing would be an ideal choice given his abundant experience in Europe. On the other hand, Qin Gang could be a suitable candidate for the latter goal due to his serving experience as PRC ambassador to the U.S.

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Notes

[1] See Chihwei Yu and K. Tristan Tang, "[The Chinese Diplomats to Watch After the 20th Party Congress](#)," *The Diplomat*, November 2, 2022.

[2] For the logic of Chinese pragmatism; see: 杨寿堪, "[实用主义辨析](#)," 人民網, May 5, 2011.

[3] For the logic of Chinese vice foreign ministerial level ambassador; see "[两位副外长出任大使, 17位副部级大使是怎样产生的?](#)" *公共外交网*, August 21, 2021.