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Party Pushes National Defense Education for All

John S. Van Oudenaren

Last September, a primary school in Lipu City, in Southwestern China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, held a commemoration ceremony for the school's designation as a "National Defense Education Model School" (国防教育示范学校) ([Defense Times](#), September 15, 2022). At the event, local military leaders and government officials emphasized that the school achieving this designation accords with the responsibilities of the new era as laid out in Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military (习近平强军思想) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee's 2019 "Outline on Implementing Patriotic Education in the New Era" (新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要). According to a report on the ceremony in the *Defense*

Times (国防时报), officials in Lipu City adhered to the principle that "national defense education should start in infancy." Scenes such as this are playing out at schools all around China as "National Defense Education" (国防教育) becomes an increasingly central part of the curricula at all grade-levels. In September, the Central Committee, State Council and Central Military Commission (CMC) jointly issued the "Opinion on Strengthening and Improving National Defense Education for All Citizens in the New Era" (关于加强和改进新时代全民国防教育工作的意见), which calls for "strengthening the party's leadership over national defense education for the whole people" (Gov.cn, September 1, 2022).



(Image: Primary School Students in Yantai, Shandong province. attend a launch ceremony for their spring semester national security education course, source: Jiaodong.net)

On February 6, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the CMC Political Work Department issued a notice on the selection of 2,687 primary and secondary schools as "national defense education model schools" (Xinhua, February 6, 2023). The notice tasks provincial military systems with creating "military-civil" linkages to support the model schools within their respective jurisdictions. The purpose is for schools to develop active relationships with local military garrisons in order to facilitate People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops holding talks, providing military demonstrations and conducting trainings for students. The network of National Defense Education Model schools has steadily expanded in recent years. In a 2021 notice, the MOE and the CMC Political Work Department called for a review of the 1,932 model schools that were established in 2017 and 2018 (Gov.cn, December 3, 2021; MOE, April 26, 2017).

In his work report to the 20th Party Congress last October, Xi referenced the need to navigate a difficult international security environment that is increasingly defined by the PRC's intensifying strategic rivalry with the U.S. and its allies ([China Brief](#), November 3, 2022). Consequently, the drive to inculcate a national security oriented mindset in the general public, albeit while maintaining a particular focus on youth education, is part of a broader effort to militarize Chinese society as CCP leadership seeks to brace citizens for an extended geopolitical contest with the U.S. and its allies.

Trend of the Times

The PRC has implemented various forms of national defense education going back decades to the nation-wide “patriotic education” (爱国主义教育) campaign, which was launched during the 1990s when the CCP was seeking to bolster its flagging legitimacy following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe ([China Education News](#), March 19, 2020). The CCP Central Committee's 1994 “Outline on the Implementation of Patriotic Education” included a measure for “advancing national defense and national security education” (进行国防教育和国家安全教育) ([Gov.cn](#), September 20, 1994). However, in 2019, these guidelines were updated with the aforementioned “Outline on Implementing Patriotic Education in the New Era” ([Gov.cn](#), November 12, 2019). The new Outline seeks to incorporate General Secretary Xi Jinping's “major contributions” and reflect his deep interest in patriotic education.

With regards to national defense and security education, the updated official guidance on Patriotic Education calls for thorough study and propagandization (宣传) of the “holistic national security concept” (总体国家安全观), which necessitates preparing the whole party and people to “consciously safeguard political security, homeland security, economic security, social security, network security and external security.” The promotion of national security education in primary and secondary education is a key element of the PRC's increasingly all-encompassing approach to security under the “holistic national security concept,” which was first introduced by Xi in 2014. As the strategic rivalry with the U.S. and its allies has intensified over the past half-decade, the PRC's embrace of “comprehensive” or “holistic” national security, a trend that the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) characterizes as the “securitization of everything,” appears certain to continue ([MERICS](#), September 15, 2022).

Mass Education

Ahead of the 20th Party Congress in September 2022, the Central Committee, State Council and Central Military Commission (CMC) jointly issued the “Opinion on Strengthening and Improving National Defense Education for All Citizens in the New Era.” This official guidance indicates that during Xi's second decade in power, there will be no letup in the CCP's ever-expanding push to protect its system from internal and external threats, both real and perceived ([Gov.cn](#), September 1, 2022). As the title suggests, the “Opinion” stresses the need to “implement the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important instructions on strengthening national defense education for all citizens.” Per the Central Committee's guidance, this entails not only strengthening general knowledge of national defense theory, regulations, technology and skills but also cultivating a “culture of national defense” among cadres and the masses. An editorial in the *People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily*

states that a turbulent geopolitical environment necessitates a heightened state of national security readiness among the population in order to support a strong country and a strong army in the “face of a real danger of war” ([PLA Daily](#), September 14, 2022).

One innovation of the Xi era, which testifies to the increasing institutionalization of mass national security education, is the annual National Security Education Day on April 15 ([Study Times](#), November 7, 2022). The day was officially established as part of the National Security Law passed by the National People's Congress in 2015 ([Gov.cn](#), July 15, 2015). Each year, schools and work places around China hold special National Security Education Day activities for students and employees. For example, in 2019, students at the elite Tsinghua University in Beijing participated in National Security Education Day publicity and learning activities, including attending study sessions of national security reports, watching patriotic movies and viewing posters intended to increase students' awareness and vigilance of threats such as foreign espionage ([Tsinghua](#), April 17, 2019). Over the past three years, these activities have continued but have been largely held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and strict zero-COVID epidemic prevention policies ([The Paper](#), April 15, 2022).

Another way that the CCP seeks to instill patriotism and national security vigilance among the public is by promoting patriotic war films. For example, the “National Defense Wanying Program” (国防教育万映计划), which is run by the China Film Foundation (CFF) under the special guidance of the National Defense Education Office of the Central Military Commission's Political Work Department, seeks to “provide policy, project approval and support for the creation of national defense military films” ([Xinhua](#), October 22, 2018; [CFF](#), October 22, 2022). In addition to facilitating engagement between the military and the film industry, the National Defense Wanying Program also holds online and in-person public screenings of patriotic films in order to “inherit the red gene,” “carry on the fine revolutionary tradition” and foster a “martial atmosphere.” The purpose of these film showings is to “use movies to tell national defense stories” (用电影讲述国防故事). For example, in October 2021, the Wanying Program collaborated with the Zhejiang Province Propaganda Department to hold a public “National Defense Film Screening Ceremony in Dongyang City, Zhejiang” ([Ministry of National Defense \[MND\]](#), November 13, 2021). The event, essentially a film festival for patriotic movies, featured ten films, including *1921*, which details the founding of the CCP in Shanghai and *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, which chronicles a group of PLA troops' experiences fighting American troops in “The War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea.”

Shaping Young Minds

While the September 2022 “Opinion on Strengthening and Improving National Defense Education for All Citizens in the New Era” emphasizes that such programs are intended for all people, particular emphasis is given to strengthening efforts to inculcate a national defense mindset in school-age youth. In order to reach China's youth, the Opinions call for integrating national defense education requirements into the curriculum and examination content in all regular middle and high schools, as well as updating performance evaluation systems for educators ([Gov.cn](#), September 1, 2022). Moreover, the new guidance seeks to familiarize students with the PLA by recommending that educators give “full play” to the military through student activities such as touring military barracks, attending briefings with military experts and participating in practice drills.

Recently, provincial military authorities have begun releasing directives for implementing the new “National Defense Education Model Schools” selected by the Ministry of Education and the CMC Political Work Department in their jurisdictions. For example, a notice from the Hainan Government states that 22 schools in the province have been selected as “model schools” ([The Paper](#), February 14). The notice stipulates that each model school should hold at least two public, national defense education classes per year. Moreover, the notice calls for model schools to be given priority when organizing training (in terms of venue, instruction and equipment). Finally, each year military “open house” days will be held for students to tour military museums and barracks in Hainan.

Conclusion

It is no secret that a career in the military has historically held minimal appeal in traditional Chinese culture, a tendency, which resurfaced during the Reform and Opening Era. In recent years, the CCP has sought to address this issue by seeking to heighten the appeal of a military career, both by playing to citizens’ patriotism and by increasing PLA pay and benefits. For example, as Kenneth Allen and Marcus Clay note, as part of Xi’s agenda to “build a strong military,” the PRC established its own Ministry of Veteran’s Affairs in 2018 with the mandate to “make the military a respectable profession” ([China Brief](#), March 11, 2022).

Although the past three decades of patriotic education have certainly heightened nationalistic sentiment among the public, educated young Chinese are still not rushing to enlist in the ranks of the PLA. Nevertheless, Xi is clearly hoping that by instilling a “national security” mindset in China’s youth early, he can convince the younger Chinese to join the past generations of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the motherland.

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Full Circle: As Spy Balloon Fallout Mounts, Xi Reverts to Old Policy Playbook

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: *General Secretary Xi Jinping waves during an inspection tour of Meishan City in Sichuan province last year, source: Xinhua).*

While President Xi Jinping has often been criticized by Western politicians, as well as intellectuals inside and outside of China, for restoring quasi-Maoist values, he has at least been consistent in his conservative agenda. On foreign policy, he has never strayed from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s claim that “the East is rising and the West is declining.” Furthermore, Xi’s keen support for the Vladimir Putin regime is central to his efforts to form a kind of axis of autocratic states comprising China, Russia, the Central Asian states, Pakistan, Iran and even North Korea. This “axis” is deemed a potent weapon to beat back the “eastward expansion” of NATO, as well as what Beijing perceives as U.S. attempts under the Biden administration to establish an Asian NATO consisting of American allies and friends, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and the ASEAN countries that have territorial disputes with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) ([RFA Chinese](#), December 15, 2022; [RFI](#), February 28, 2022).

Domestically, since 2020, Xi has promoted an economic strategy of “dual circulation,” which entails a mixture of autarkic “internal circulation” accompanied by “international circulation”—a continuation of China’s decades-long efforts to lure foreign investment and technology ([China Brief](#), September 9, 2022). Yet, as Xi’s *Political Report to the 20th Party Congress* made clear, the PRC is increasingly emphasizing self-reliance and seeking to leverage its 1.4 billion-person market in order to generate annual GDP growth of at least 5 to 6 percent during the Xi era, which is expected to last until at least the 22nd Party Congress in 2032. The supreme leader

is particularly eager to wean the high-tech sector off of its reliance on key components and know-how from the U.S. or its allies ([Gov.cn](#), February 6; [VOA Chinese](#), October 20, 2020; [BBC Chinese](#), August 10, 2020).

Demise of “Smile Diplomacy”

After consolidating his status as “leader for life” at the 20th Party Congress last October, the 69-year-old Xi, who is also CCP General Secretary and Commander-in-Chief, seemed to have shifted gears. Starting with his November 2022 meeting with President Biden on the sidelines of the G20 conference in Bali, Xi and his top aides adopted a form of “smile diplomacy” in an apparent effort to entice Western investors ([New York Times Chinese Edition](#), November 15, 2022; [The White House](#), November 14, 2022). Attempts have also been made to at least restore regular high-level visits between the PRC and the U.S. In the wake of Beijing’s unexpected ending of zero-COVID lockdowns and quarantines on December 7, mutual travel between China and several Western and Asian nations has resumed. Last month, Xi also sent his senior economic advisor, outgoing Vice-Premier Liu He, to the Davos World Economic Forum in Switzerland to emphasize that “China is back” to playing a key role in the global economy ([Gov.cn](#), January 17; [Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), January 17).

In early February, however, the Xi leadership seems to have suddenly reversed course on both its foreign and domestic policies. After the detection of PRC “spy balloons” overflying North America as well as Latin America—and the shooting down of what Beijing claimed to be a “civilian airship” by the U.S. military on February 4—the Chinese Foreign Ministry switched back to its infamous “wolf warrior” diplomacy ([Xinhuanet](#), February 5). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning blamed Washington, saying that the “U.S. side’s deliberate hyping up of the matter and even use of force are unacceptable and irresponsible” ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), February 6). In response to Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s postponement of his visit to China, which was agreed upon during the Biden-Xi meeting in Bali, Beijing went so far as to deny that the Chinese side had ever invited America’s top diplomat to visit ([VOA Chinese](#), February 8; [BBC Chinese](#), February 3). There seems little doubt that the global image of China has been dented as a result of these developments.

The U.S. government has briefed 40-odd countries about the recent history of PRC “spy balloons” gathering intelligence within their jurisdictions. Officials in key US allies, from Germany to Japan, have expressed indignation at these espionage activities. There is growing suspicion among the U.S. and its allies that President Xi might be seeking to play the so-called “Russia card” by visiting Moscow in the coming month or so. In Moscow, Xi might raise the possibility of boosting aid to Russia as a threat to the Western alliance ([French Radio International](#), February 8; [People’s Daily](#), January 1). During his visit to Moscow in early February, Vice Foreign Minister Ma Chaoxu said both sides would “push forward China-Russian relations to an even higher level.” ([Netease.com](#), February 7; [Australian Financial Daily](#), February 4).

An obvious factor behind Xi’s about-face in both foreign and domestic policies could be Beijing’s perception that the U.S. and its allies in both the EU and Asia are upping the ante in their efforts to isolate China on multiple fronts. NATO Secretary Jens Stoltenberg’s recent visit to South Korea and Japan aroused fears within CCP leadership that an Asian NATO may be in the offing, especially with defense spending rising and countries across the region, including Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, Vietnam and the Philippines, increasing their security cooperation with the U.S. Most worrisome for Beijing is Tokyo’s decision to augment military spending in addition to forging defense agreements with the U.S., U.K. and Australia ([Sina.com.cn](#), February 1; [Deutsche](#)

[Welle Chinese](#), January 31). These deals would allow the reciprocal stationing of troops between Japan on the one hand, and the U.K. and Australia on the other. The U.S. forces have also beefed up their defense capacity and operations in Okinawa as well as the Ryukyu Islands that lie close to Taiwan. U.S. forces have also won permission to station troops in four strategic locations around Philippines ([VOA Chinese](#), February 9; [BBC Chinese](#), February 3). Given that most U.S. allies are opposed to Russian expansionism, Beijing's "playing of the Russian card" could very well backfire.

Modernization Minus Westernization

Even more surprising than the Xi leadership's apparent revival of "wolf warrior" diplomacy is the new impetus that the "ruler for life" has given to reviving the late Great Helmsman's penchant for prioritizing "self-reliance" in economic policymaking. During a recent speech to the Central Party School, Xi noted that "Chinese-style modernization is a new model for human advancement, and it dispels the myth that 'modernization is equal to Westernization'" ([People's Daily](#), February 7; [Gov.cn](#), February 7). Xi did not reference further opening up the country to Western or East Asian countries, but rather cited the need for efforts to "expand the channels for developing countries to achieve modernization and to provide a Chinese solution to aid the exploration of a better social system for humanity."

Due to the fact that the Chinese economy has for decades relied mainly on injections of state capital into the housing and infrastructure sectors, government spending on gigantic projects has led to unprecedented levels of debt sustained by different levels of government administration, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), as well as private conglomerates such as property giant, Evergrande. While the State Council has since late 2022 instructed state banks to pump more money into infrastructure, overleveraged property giants are told to use the funds mainly to finish uncompleted buildings that have already been sold to consumers. Obviously, this overdependence on state-financed infrastructure building has proven to be a questionable tool for economic growth and reform ([South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), January 5; [Globalconstructionreview.com](#), August 7, 2022).

Xi's novel approach to economic growth, which is officially known as the "new development pattern" (新发展格局), largely focuses on two related strategies: boosting domestic consumption, particularly consumer spending by members of China's estimated 400 million middle-class citizens, and building a "unified national market" (全国统一大市场) under the meticulous guidance of the CCP. Details on the "new development pattern" were spelled out in a Politburo study session on February 2 ([China Daily](#), February 2; [News.cn](#), February 1). Perhaps owing to his ill feelings toward the U.S.-led boycott of cutting-edge sectors such as semiconductors and AI, Xi's "new development pattern" emphasizes not so much infrastructure or advanced technology but the development of a "unified national market" driven by consumer spending, government stimulation of SOEs and indigenous innovation in certain technological fields. Although exports were one of the few areas in which the Chinese economy performed relatively well in 2022, Xi has had little to say about enticing foreign investment or undertaking economic liberalization ([China Daily](#), January 14; [Gov.cn](#), January 14). Rather, the focus is on autarkic "internal circulation."

Since early 2022, the Xi leadership has earmarked enormous resources to buttress domestic consumption and galvanize a “unified national market” (Chinabriefing.com, April 22, 2022). In a February 2 Politburo session, the paramount leader said it is necessary to “expand domestic demand” by “boosting the people’s consumption, so that they so that they can consume with a stable income, dare to consume without worries, and are willing to consume due to the excellent consumption environment and strong sense of having gained” (News.cn, February 2). This is a tall order given the lackluster GDP growth of merely three percent last year, with consumer spending dropping 0.2 percent from 2021. The annual household disposable income growth rate fell to 8.39 percent from 2013 to 2022 from the average rate of 11.04 percent from 2001 to 2012 (Foreign Policy, February 2; CNBC.com, January 30). Wages in Chinese cities rose just 2.2 percent in inflation-adjusted terms in the first nine months of 2022, less than half the rate that prevailed before the pandemic. Youth unemployment reached almost 20 percent. Household debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 61.2 percent in the third quarter of 2022 to 61.9 percent in December 2022 (Ceicdata.com, January 1). As much of these household borrowings are used for paying off mortgages, the desire of the average Chinese family to venture into the housing market again is lukewarm at best. This is demonstrated by the low sales figures and purchasing volumes in the real estate market, which accounts for close to 30 percent of GDP, since it ran into major trouble in 2021 and 2022 (SCMP, January 4; Global Times, November 15, 2022).

Moreover, despite the lifting of practically all COVID-19 prevention lockdowns and quarantines, relatively high joblessness and a lack of confidence in future economic growth are likely to reinforce consumer preferences for saving instead of spending. Aggregate household savings reached almost 20 trillion yuan in 2022, an increase of some 8 trillion yuan over 2021 (China News Service, January 30; Huanqiu, January 12). Three-years of “zero-tolerance” COVID strictures plus the sudden reversal of the policy on December 8 have also exposed dire problems concerning both state medical facilities and social welfare benefits particularly for the elderly. Last week, in Wuhan, more than 10,000 retired workers staged a demonstration against the government’s arbitrary reduction of medical payouts, which illustrates the financial troubles facing state pension and social welfare authorities (Rfi, February 10; RFA Chinese, February 8). The insufficient provision further predisposes the Chinese middle-class to prioritize saving for medical and retirement purposes over spending.

One Country, One Market

The formation of a “high-standard market system,” particularly the building of a “unified national market,” is closely related to Xi’s goal of bolstering domestic consumption. As a key element in the “new development pattern,” the concept of a “unified national market” is also integral to promoting reliance on “internal circulation.” A united, homogenous market means a reduction of regional barriers to the circulation of resources and products as well as frequent crackdowns on violations of IPR as well as “monopolistic” or other unfair commercial practices (21st Century Economic Herald, February 10; Chinese Workers Net, February 7).

According to the *Opinion on Expediting the Construction of a Unified National Market* (hereafter *Opinion*), a policy statement issued by the State Council in March 2022, Beijing must “push ahead the high-efficiency circulation [of resources and products] and expansion of the scale of a domestic market” (Qstheory.cn, May 10, 2022; Gov.cn, March 25, 2022). The *Opinion* pointed out that while market forces should be allowed a greater role in promoting the efficiency of this unified national market, the government must do even more to raise the quality of “internal circulation” through means including supervising “fair competition” and “deepening

the division of labor” among different production and service units. “We must expand the scale and volume of the market, [and] ceaselessly nurture and develop a strong domestic market,” the *Opinion* added.

During the Politburo Study Session, several newly named Politburo members, who are Xi protégés and have recently been promoted to lead key regions such as Beijing, Guangdong and Liaoning, also spoke of their strategies for expanding the GDP within their jurisdictions. What is lacking, however, are new policies to augment market forces and to demonstrate to multinationals and foreign governments that Xi is ready to reintroduce aspects of the Open-Door policies initiated by the great architect of Reform and Opening, Deng Xiaoping and followed by ex-presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Moreover, recent government measures to encourage consumer spending, bail out overleveraged property developers and foster a fair and non-monopolistic “unified national market” could be signs that Xi is pivoting back to his obsession with exerting tight party-state control over the economy. The state could also, in the name of promoting fair and transparent competition, stage a renewed crackdown on quasi-private IT giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, and JD.com. Another manifestation of quasi-Maoist economic norms is the proliferation of *Gongxiaoshe* (供销社), government-run “supply and marketing co-ops,” which pose fierce competition to supermarkets, particularly those owned by private entrepreneurs. By the end of last year, there were 2,789 *gongxiaoshe* at the county level or above. These entities are estimated to have done about 6.26 trillion yuan (917 billion USD) worth of business in 2022 ([New Beijing Post](#), November 15, [Finance.sina.com](#), November 2). And despite reassurances made by the Xi team that Beijing would do more to strengthen China’s beleaguered private-sector enterprises, there has been a revival of yet another Maoist practice, which involves SOEs snapping up lucrative private firms via mergers and acquisitions ([VOAChinese](#), November 14, 2022; [RFA Cantonese](#), November 2, 2022).

Conclusion

In the wake of more suspicious-looking flying vehicles appearing over North America, several of which have been shot down by the U.S. Air Force, Washington sanctioned six more Chinese firms alleged to have ties to the PRC’s military intelligence establishment last week ([Global Times](#), February 12). Depending on what Xi might say in his forthcoming trip to Moscow—and how the PLA would respond to a planned visit to Taiwan by the new U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy—U.S.-China relations seem to be heading towards an irreversible downward spiral. The fact that China-U.S. trade reached a record \$690 billion in 2022 seems to indicate that a thorough decoupling of the two economies seems far-fetched ([Cato Institute](#), February 9; [Rfi](#), February 8). However, President Biden has been repeatedly criticized by Republican members of Congress for being too soft on China ([SCMP](#), February 6). To be better placed for possibly one more run at the U.S. presidency, Biden may be predisposed to further beef up the “anti-China” containment policy that will have an adverse impact on Chinese consumption, manufacturing, as well as other aspects of the “internal circulation” policy.

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In Search of Self-Reliance: Xi Overhauls China's Innovation System

Michael Laha



(Image: Technicians at the National Engineering Technology Research Center for Nanomedicine, **source:** Wuhan Institute of Biotechnology)

Introduction

In 2016, President Xi Jinping visited Nanchang University in Jiangxi Province to learn more about the work of the National Silicon-based LED Engineering Technology Research Center ([Jiangxi News](#), September 25, 2019). The center caught the attention of China's leadership after it received first place in the 2015 National Technology Invention Prize for its work on "high-efficiency GaN-based blue-light emitting diodes on silicon-substrates" ([State Council](#), January 8, 2016). This technology is used in LED lighting systems and celebrated in Chinese media for breaking Japanese and American monopolies in these technologies. A 2022 article summarized the strategic significance of GaN-based blue-LEDs the following way:

By moving from basic research to technology invention, to product creation, and then to business marketing, a complete and feasible innovation and entrepreneurship plan is formed. The project not only resolves the "stranglehold" problem, but also ensures the complete industrial chain is "independent and controllable."

That is how the story is told anyways. This particular work was billed as a "third way" for LED technology and backed up by "independent intellectual property" ([MOST](#), October, 2016). Last year, the center's director, Dr.

Jiang Fengyi was quoted as saying, “if you want China's LEDs to have their own right to speak, you must find a new way” ([China Education News](#), June 20, 2022). Starting at the earliest stages of innovation and shepherding an idea all the way to production, is seen as a pathway by which China might address dependencies in certain technologies. This narrative is a significant departure from the type of work National Engineering Technology Research Centers (NETRCs) were originally designed to perform.

Reforming National Engineering Technology Research Centers

The National Silicon-based LED Engineering Technology Research Center is one of at least 374 NETRCs in China ([Forward-The Economist](#), December 3, 2020). These research institutions are currently undergoing reform. After the issuance of a series of policies in 2016 and 2017, NETRCs are being reshaped to meet contemporary policy priorities, in particular through integration into newly created institutions that facilitate the development of so-called “chokepoint” or “stranglehold” technologies. Such technologies are those in which China is susceptible to the application of foreign export controls, because it is not able to make them without foreign technology and knowledge, especially from the U.S., Europe or Japan. Three publicly available studies produced by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), from 2014-2016, shed light on these centers and their special history in developing technologies for Chinese domestic industry (MOST, [2014](#); [2015](#); [2016](#)). Moreover, these studies also provide indicators of what their activities might entail moving forward.

The centers emerged in the early 1990s with a mandate to “actively carry out the digestion, assimilation, and innovation of imported technology from abroad, and become the technical support for enterprises to absorb foreign advanced technology and improve product quality” ([State Scientific and Technological Commission](#), February 4, 1993). As such these institutions are part of China’s legacy innovation platform, the IDAR (introduce, digest, assimilate, re-innovate) system. [1]

In his 2022 book, *Innovate to Dominate: The Rise of the Chinese Techno-Security State*, Tai Ming Cheung describes the IDAR system as a process of “creative adaptation or advanced imitation” that emerged in the late 1980s. The process was applied in earnest starting in the 1990s as a way to introduce technologies from the countries emerging from the former Soviet Union. It was at that time that NETRCs were created alongside a host of similar organizations such as the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)-managed National Engineering Research Centers. Collectively, these institutions played an important role in the buildup of China’s defense industry by focusing especially on the third step, the assimilation process which frequently occurs through reverse engineering of foreign technologies. [2]

A series of three Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) reports seeks to capture the proportion of inventions derived from different “types” of innovation. According to MOST’s in-depth study of NETRCs in 2014, 70.40 percent of these centers’ scientific accomplishments resulted from “self-developed R&D” (自行研发) ([MOST](#), July 2015). [3] Meanwhile, 23.56 percent were the result of “absorption from the supporting unit” (吸收依托单位). The supporting unit refers to the host organization of the engineering technology research center. For instance, in the case of the National Silicon-based LED Engineering Technology Research Center, the “supporting unit” is Nanchang University, which is the educational institution where the center is based. This suggests that nearly a quarter of the innovative work being done at these centers involves products that

were “industrialized” or transferred from work done at the center’s support units. This industrialization often happens in collaboration with corporate partners. In the case of the center at Nanchang University, Lattice Power (晶能光电) plays an important role as a commercializing partner ([Nanchang University](#)). The remaining accomplishments were “absorbed from outside units” (吸收外单位), through “introduction from abroad” (引进国外) or “other” means. The following year, in 2015, the proportion of “self-developed R&D” rose slightly to 71.22 percent ([MOST](#), October, 2016) as did “absorption from supporting units” (to 24.27 percent) while the category of “other” shrunk to nearly zero percent.

The statistical breakdown, however, changed in 2016, when 88.72 percent of technological achievements were reported as arising from “indigenous innovation” (自主创新). The remainder of achievements were ascribed to “introduction, digestion, assimilation, and re-innovation” (引进、消化、吸收再创新) ([MOST](#), April 2018). These categories directly comport with the types of innovation NETRCs were originally designed to perform and the type of innovation they are expected to perform moving forward.

To what extent these statistics mean anything is unclear. The different types of innovation are not addressed anywhere else in the report and a series of case studies at the end of the reports do not offer descriptions about how certain achievements came about. One thing that these numbers do indicate is that the vast majority of innovation emerging from NETRCs is labeled as originating in China in some way or another. Consequently, these statistics serve to “narrate” a transition from the IDAR system to a system aimed at homegrown innovation. As such, this narrative is in line with top-level policy designs currently under way in China such as the 2016 Innovation-Driven Development Strategy (IDDS) which describes goals for moving the country toward “original innovation.”

Despite the problems associated with statistics on innovation origins, these three official reports help paint a more general profile of NETRCs. For instance, of the 360 centers the reports describe, the three most represented areas of research are in materials (67), biotechnology and population health (40) and advanced manufacturing (46). In addition to being based in so-called supporting units, NETRCs are also overseen by managing units. A wide variety of ministries serve as managing units including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Technology. However, other government organs such as the Ministry of Public Security and the Logistics Support Department of the Central Military Commission also oversee NETRCs indicating a likely dual-use dimension of their work. Collectively, NETRCs employ over 50,000 R&D staff, including 12,000 PhDs. In 2016, NETRCs received approval for 8,240 patents, the vast majority of which were domestic patents. The same year, NETRCs reportedly filed 1196 standards of which only 101 were international standards. In 2016, 360 NETRCs collectively managed some 258.106 billion RMB (\$37.74 billion) worth of assets, which is more than double the value held three years earlier ([MOST](#), April 2018). These developments indicate the rapidly growing role of NETRCs in China’s innovation system. While these numbers are somewhat outdated, they represent some of the best assessments of a largely understudied set of institutions in China.

Springboards to Self-Reliance

NETRCs are poised to play a role in China's current approach to innovation, which is increasingly fixated on achieving "self-reliance." The "13th Five Year Plan for Science and Technology Innovation" notes NETRCs alongside a variety of research entities that needed to be optimized "based on national strategy and the needs of the innovation chain layout" ([State Council](#), July 28, 20216). In 2017, China's central government issued policies announcing that new approvals of NETRCs would stop while existing National Engineering Technology Research Centers would be "merged or integrated" ([Gov.cn](#), August 24, 2018). Meanwhile, NETRCs are mentioned in a recently-released "Action Plan for Improving the Technological Capabilities of Enterprises (2022-2023)" where they are noted as having a role in boosting the innovative capacities of Chinese companies in particular by guiding work in key and core technologies ([MOST, MoF](#), August 5, 2022).

In addition to being included in policies designed to upgrade domestic companies, some NERTCs will be converted into a new type of institution, the national technology innovation center (国家技术创新中心) ([MOST, MOF](#), February 2, 2021). For national technology innovation centers, a recently updated strategic priority embedded in their administrative measures is alleviating technology "chokepoints." This process of conversion is currently ongoing. For instance, the Henan Agricultural University based National Wheat Engineering Technology Research Center (国家小麦工程技术研究中心) is applying for status as the National Wheat Technology Innovation Center (国家小麦技术创新中心) ([Henan Business Daily](#), January 12; [Henan Agricultural University](#), October 21, 2022; [Henan Agricultural University](#), July 17, 2020)

These new innovation centers 'should adhere to the principle of "fewer but better,"' a nod to the 2016 Innovation Development Strategy (IDDS) which emphasizes a general move from quantity to quality in innovation ([State Council and Central Committee](#), May 19, 2016). A 2017 work plan for national technology innovation centers lists the priority areas for innovation centers. They are expected to perform work that is at the "frontiers of science and technology," on "the main economic battlefield," and serves the "major needs of the country." The latter is defined as "national security and major interests" which includes addressing "chokepoints" ([MOST](#), November 23, 2017).

Conversion to new institutions represents a second pathway by which China's innovation ecosystem is being transformed through top-down governance. A similar set of institutions, so-called National Engineering Research Centers (NERCs), which have a similar mandate to NETRCs but are managed by China's powerful National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) were reorganized by way of consolidation and updating. The approximately 191 NERCs currently in operation stem from combining two previously distinct types of institutions (formerly National Engineering Laboratories and National Engineering Research Centers) and updating their administrative measures ([ASPI The Strategist](#), September 26, 2022). Meanwhile, some NETRCs will be carried forward and at least some will be converted into a new type of organization. In so doing-the Chinese central government embeds new strategic priorities in its research funding programs.

Conclusion

Xi Jinping is spearheading a major overhaul of the Chinese innovation system with two broad goals in mind. The first goal is to steer the system toward indigenous innovation or a kind of original innovation in China with less and less input from abroad. Increasing indigenous innovation is intended to help achieve the second goal, which is self-reliance. By tracing the work, shifting mandates, and institutional relationships and lineages of NERTRCs, we can begin to see in more concrete terms the implementation of these high-level ambitions. National Engineering Technology Research Centers promise to be important players in performing the actual heavy lifting of innovating individual technologies that help facilitate China's tech independence.

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Notes

[1] The typical rendering of R in the IDAR system as “re-innovate” or “再创新.” However, in these 1993 administrative measures for NERTCs the “再” is omitted, though it is likely implied.

[2] For more on the IDAR system read Tai Ming Cheung, [*Innovate to Dominate: The Rise of the Chinese Techno-Security State*](#) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

[3] The report renders the Chinese name 国家工程技术研究中心 of National Engineering Technology Research Centers into National Engineering Research Centers which in Chinese would be 国家工程研究中心. That is an error on part of the report's authors. National Engineering Research Centers are distinct and managed by China's National Reform and Development Commission. National Engineering Technology Research Centers are managed by the Ministry of Science and Technology and this article focuses on these centers.

The Lion, the Wolf Warrior and the Crossroads: UK-China Relations at a Turning Point

Matthew Brazil



(Image: UK and PRC flags on display, source: UK Parliament)

Introduction

In early 2018, UK Prime Minister Theresa May visited China with a British business delegation, seeking a free trade deal and expressing optimism over Beijing's "one country, two systems" formula for governing Hong Kong ([Global Times](#), January 31, 2018; [Zaobao](#), January 31, 2018). In her first foreign trip since moving into 10 Downing Street, she promised that the "golden era of relations" between the UK and China would be even better after Brexit ([Xinhua](#), February 1, 2018). Since May's visit, however, a great deal has happened to move UK-China relations in the opposite direction, with the PRC's suppression of mass demonstrations in Hong Kong ([Global Times](#), July 29, 2020); the implementation of the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law that London sees as a breach of "one country, two systems" ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), June 12, 2020); the British riposte in offering a path to citizenship for Hong Kongers ([Gov.cn](#), April 14, 2021); and the escalation of tensions between China and its trading partners, particularly the UK's closest ally, America ([FMPRC](#), September 24, 2021; [Xinhua](#), October 5, 2021).

The British establishment, like their American cousins, have changed tack on China of late. In June 2022, MI5 Director Ken McCallum and FBI Director Chris Wray gave a joint address warning business and academic leaders in Britain of the "massive shared challenge" posed by China ([MI5](#), July 6, 2022). Two years earlier, McCallum said that if Russian behavior is like "bursts of bad weather," then "China is changing the climate" ([CIGI](#), June 2, 2022). Last November, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, referring to UK-China relations, said that "the so-called 'golden era' is over, along with the naive idea that trade would lead to social and political reform" in the People's Republic ([ThePrint](#), November 29, 2022). Even the pro-engagement business weekly *Beijing*

to Britain admits that no one in the UK Parliament “believes that an enriched Chinese middle class will steer the country towards democracy” ([Beijing to Britain](#), January 24, 2021).

Britain’s conundrum in stabilizing commercial relations with Beijing while heeding American sensibilities is as difficult as at any time since Nixon’s groundbreaking trip to China in 1972. Meanwhile in Beijing, the decades-old ordeal of striving to play the British off against the Americans has become an increasingly uphill battle. In fact, much of today’s menu of bilateral issues between London and Beijing, with the Washington factor always hovering in the background, might be familiar to Clement Atlee, Winston Churchill, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. That brings some predictability to the rollercoaster ride of UK-China relations, but unsettling variables have changed the course of relations and pushed London, not to mention the rest of NATO, ever closer to Washington. Specific aspects of the PRC’s increasingly destabilizing and aggressive policies that have rankled London include the removal of Hong Kong as a centerpiece of the UK-China bilateral relationship; and Beijing’s announcement immediately prior to Russia’s invasion full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, that “the Sino-Russian cooperation has no limits, no exclusion zone, no ceiling” (中俄合作没有止境, 没有禁区, 没有上限) ([Global Times](#), December 24, 2021; [Gov.cn](#), February 4, 2022).

Moralism and Outrage in Beijing

On the Chinese side, sensibilities regarding the UK are shaped in part by historical memories of China’s “Century of National Humiliation” (百年国耻), which began with the defeat of the Qing Dynasty by Britain in the First Opium War ([Sohu](#), March 26, 2021). Following this first of many disasters, British military muscle carved out not only Hong Kong as a Crown Colony but huge “spheres of influence” that grew like cancer for the rest of the 1800s ([Alpha History](#), December 20, 2022). Other foreign powers followed suit, culminating in the defeat of China by the despised Japanese in 1894-95, which was followed by Imperial Japan’s eventual takeover of China’s entire northeast in the early 20th century. That string of humiliations is, by all accounts, the root cause of the occasional, sudden popular outrage against foreigners in China, even today.

China’s chance to redress the humiliation arose as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) marched to victory in 1948-49. When they took the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang, Mao decided, at Stalin’s suggestion, to place the U.S. consulate staff under house arrest for over a year ([ADST](#), September 12, 2012). He considered America to be China’s most dangerous enemy since they had sided with the Chinese Nationalists, though Britain was less dangerous as they had been neutral in the Chinese Civil War. America, Mao said, had to change its behavior in order to have diplomatic relations with China. Washington was outraged at the detention of its diplomats, which at the time caused just as much public furor as the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979-80. But Washington could do little in response without an inconceivable military commitment. [1]

Pragmatism in London and Beijing

By contrast, London’s interests in China were deeper than those of America, albeit only marginally less troubled. The British had something that Beijing wanted: a diplomatic, commercial, and espionage window on the world in Hong Kong. The nascent People’s Republic of China (PRC) agreed not to reclaim Hong Kong—as the Nationalist Chinese under Chiang Kai-shek had threatened. In exchange, the British promised continued

tolerance of CCP Underground (地下党) activity in the Crown Colony, further bolstering an agreement from 1938. For Beijing, this was a pragmatic policy they termed “fully utilize (what one has now) and plan for the long run” (长期打算充分利用). [2]

An occasionally workable UK-CCP relationship was set in motion. Its origins dated back to World War II, when the CCP Underground, intelligence, and guerilla organizations worked with the British against Japanese forces in Hong Kong and elsewhere. [3] Hong Kong and Macau became highly useful to CCP Intelligence in the decades that followed (Mattbrazil.net, July 30, 2017). [4]

Britain may have been a close ally of Beijing’s main enemy in Washington, but the CCP realized that London could be swayed based on its desire to maintain Hong Kong as a Crown Colony, Britain’s extensive commercial interests on the mainland, the belief that the *de facto* ruler of China should be recognized and previous Anglo-American disagreements over China policy. In January 1950, the British proposed establishing diplomatic relations with China. [5] Beijing eventually accepted but held London at arm’s length, at what the Chinese termed “half relations” (半外交), acknowledging Humphrey Trevelyan, the British head of mission in the Chinese capital, not as an ambassador or even as *chargé d’affaires*, but as “the head of the British delegation for negotiations for the establishment of diplomatic relations.” [6]

UK-China relations froze with the Korean War (1950-53). At the time, perhaps an equally important irritant was the realization in Beijing that the British would not completely sever relations with the Nationalist government on Taiwan, out of deference to Washington. But rapprochement followed in 1955, when the two sides exchanged *chargés*. At the Geneva Conference one year prior, Zhou Enlai “excelled in playing British and French realism off against the rigidity and inflexibility of American Cold War policies,” epitomizing the United Front strategy that remains a hallmark today of PRC foreign policy: unite with all possible forces to isolate the most dangerous enemy. [7] This is somewhat reminiscent of Washington’s current struggle to convince Britain and other nations to eschew Huawei telecommunication equipment out of fear that it would be used for espionage.

Geopolitics, Moralism and Hard Cash

CCP United Front work combined with conflicting UK and U.S. interests in Asia contributed to “tension and mistrust” in the Anglo-American relationship during the 1950s. The British were disturbed by the American nuclear deterrence posture against China and their commitment to defend the offshore islands Quemoy and Matsu. Washington’s policy toward China was heavily colored by emotional issues: the “Who Lost China” debate, the Red Scare, the Korean War, the question of Taiwan and the pro-KMT “China Lobby.” By contrast, Britain’s Foreign Office had no “China Lobby” to contend with other than the pro-engagement business community.

UK-China commercial relations began growing in ways that their American allies could not have imagined themselves pursuing. The example of aerospace sales by Britain to China is instructive: such exports are particularly lucrative, generate well-paid jobs, and always raise dual-use export control concerns. The 1963 sale of British Vickers Viscount turboprop aircraft was an opening gambit, albeit interrupted by the manic period

of the Cultural Revolution (1966-69) ([BAE Systems](#)). But in 1971 China negotiated the purchase of nine British Trident jets, including one that served as Premier Zhou's official aircraft, with others allocated to the PLA Air Force ([NYT](#), August 9, 1972; [South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), April 9, 2017). Ironically, one of the planes was immediately lost in September of that year when Marshal Lin Biao fled China onboard a new Trident, which ran out of fuel and crashed in Mongolia ([SCMP](#), September 12, 2016).

The promise of substantial export sales for Britain and technology acquisitions for Beijing beckoned both sides. From March 1971 to March 1972, London and Beijing improved relations in a series of steps. Zhou Enlai formally apologized to the British *Chargé* for the invasion and burning by Red Guards of the British Mission in 1967, blaming it on extremists, though it would be another decade before anyone was charged with a crime connected to the incident. [8] During a full year of negotiations, Beijing drove a hard bargain on the sensitive issue of Taiwan, insisting that the British first close their consular office on the island. London eventually agreed, and the two sides established full diplomatic relations in March 1972, a month after Nixon's trip to China ([GOV.UK](#), March 13, 2017; [FMPRC](#), March 29, 2017). In the decades since, UK-China bilateral trade has steadily grown decade after decade to reach a record level in 2022 ([CIIE](#), March 14, 2022). But tensions have also gradually mounted.

Hard Bargaining, Hard Luck

The Thatcher government's attempt to retain the island of Hong Kong "in perpetuity" while returning the rest of the colony to China at the end of its 99-year lease was flatly rejected by China's then paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping. As a result, PM Margaret Thatcher, the same British leader who went to war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands and emerged victorious, realized that Britain was powerless to resist China's demand to return the entire territory—and that America was not about to anger Beijing as it strove to keep China onside against the Soviet Union.

The 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration to restore Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong contained a promise by China to preserve the territory's system for 50 years after the 1997 handover. However, before that period was halfway over, Beijing scrapped it with the passage of the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law after a series of moves that tightened Beijing's grip, leading up to the massive 2019-2020 protests ([GOV.UK](#), May 28, 2020; [Gov.cn](#), December 20, 2021). Ho-Fung Hung of Johns Hopkins University, a scholar of Hong Kong politics, makes a persuasive argument that Deng Xiaoping's promise of "one country, two systems" was a ploy to lull Hong Kongers and the British into accepting a gradually hardening set of CCP policies. Hung points out that Deng Xiaoping, in the 1950s, crafted a remarkably similar set of initial promises and tactics in Tibet, eventually leading to a harsh crackdown and an exodus by Tibetans with the ability to flee, a situation echoed recently in Hong Kong. [9]

London's value to Beijing as a partner in maintaining the stability of Hong Kong precipitously declined after the 1997 handover: the CCP no longer needed London to keep that window on the world open. Partly as a tactic to make Hong Kong less irreplaceable, the Party moved to advantage Shanghai as an alternate Chinese center for international finance ([Ey.com](#), July 24, 2020). Early signs arose of less than reconcilable political differences between the UK and China. Between 1994 and 2006, China generally voted against the UK and U.S. in the

UN General Assembly, which considers international political and social questions, aligning itself instead with Brazil, India, Iran, and Russia. [10]

More dramatic signs of instability and decline in the UK-China relationship followed, picking up steam in the late 2000s. They are too numerous to list here, but examples included pro-Tibet protests in London along the Olympic torch route in April, 2008, infuriating Beijing on the eve of it hosting the Olympics; gradual crackdowns against free speech and free association in Hong Kong, leading up to kidnappings in Hong Kong by CCP agents of dissident booksellers and others in 2015 ([BBC Chinese](#), November 11, 2015); British suspension of its extradition treaty with China following the imposition by Beijing of the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law ([Straits Times](#), July 21, 2020); the attack by Chinese diplomats against peaceful demonstrators at the Chinese Consulate in Manchester in October 2022, participated in by the Consul general himself ([RFI](#), October 19, 2022); and the assault a month later by Chinese police in Shanghai of a BBC journalist covering anti-lockdown protests ([CPJ](#), November 28, 2022).

Advantage, Wolf?

As Beijing grew stronger and more influential, London found it more difficult to tolerate China's increasingly assertive policies and aggressive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, even while trade boomed ([People's Daily](#), June 10, 2021). Charles Parton, OBE, a longtime UK Foreign Office observer of China, wrote in 2019 that "threats and bullying, particularly related to economic ties, are becoming an increasingly common method for the CCP to get its way in foreign relations—to give way to it would, in the long run, lead to greater dependency and a weakened ability to support UK values, security, and prosperity" ([RUSI](#), February 2019).

After PM Rishi Sunak's speech in November, another British China expert, Nigel Inkster, CMG, the former Director for Operations and Intelligence at MI-6, now Senior Advisor for Cyber Security and China at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, told BBC Radio 4 that he did not think the UK-China "golden era" was ever a viable and real concept ([BBC](#), November 29, 2022). "It attempted to focus on economic relations while putting geopolitics to one side, and experience shows you simply cannot do that."

The CCP might agree, and see an advantage for China in this arena.

Compared to the UK and other democracies, the PRC can more easily balance and shape economic goals to geopolitical ones. The CCP's monopoly on political power and imperfect yet strong control over industry, S&T, the arts, and the telling of history has reached the height of authoritarian efficiency. They have no credible opposition, no "Britain lobby" nor "America lobby," although they do see a society full of enemies—Tibetans, Uyghurs, activists, traitors to the Chinese race and turncoats, all to be suppressed.

For decades, the CCP has striven to reach industrial and technological parity with the UK and U.S., and in many ways has succeeded. As a ruling party and government, they lead the world in monitoring and surveillance of their population. Their sophisticated and practiced international influence machinery coordinates misleading messaging such as "one country, two systems" that has successfully lulled large numbers of people initially outside of the CCP's control, such as Tibetans and "spoiled Hong Kongers", into grudging acceptance of enormous changes in their lives ([FP](#), September 12, 2019).

Beijing's relationship with London, however, is fraught with new difficulties. The PRC has struggled to deal with a torrent of negative reaction to its policies at home and abroad. Meanwhile, the UK is re-evaluating its strategy toward China. In 2020, Charles Parton recommended that London seek to better understand the CCP and its actual goals, formulate policies that bring consistency between differing UK interests, and "unite with like-minded democracies, not just the U.S. and 'Five Eyes' allies, but EU nations, India, Japan, and other Asian countries" ([King's College London](#), June 2020).

If bilateral issues continue to fester between Beijing and London, a British reevaluation of relations with China will likely continue, pushing the UK closer still to the U.S., along with their NATO allies. It remains to be seen if Beijing can reverse a bad situation by its usual tactics of dialing down the wolf, turning on the charm and sweetening the business relationship. That sort of approach might work once again. Or it may be too late. Time will tell.

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Notes

[1] Qiang Zhai, *The Dragon, the Lion, and the Eagle, Chinese / British / American Relations, 1949-1958* (Kent, Ohio, The Kent State University Press, 1994), 24-27.

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[3] Chan Sui-jeung, *East River Column*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009) 41-43, 50, 51-55.

[4] Interview with James Lilley, Washington, DC, 2004.

[5] 王红续 [Wang Hongxu] *七十年代来的中英关系* [Sino-British Relations Since the 1970s] (哈尔滨: 黑龙江教育出版社 [Haerbin: Heilongjiang Educational Publishing], 18.

[6] Qiang Zhai, *The Dragon, the Lion, and the Eagle*, 44-45, 146

[7] Qiang Zhai, *The Dragon, the Lion, and the Eagle*, 12, 14-16, 19-21; Qiang Zhai, "China and the Geneva Conference of 1954," in *The China Quarterly*, vol. 129, 103-122. doi:10.1017/S0305741000041242

[8] Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003), 184-185.

[9] Ho-Fung Hung, *City on the Edge*, 110-121.

[10] David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global, the Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 140-141.

Assessing the Role of the PLA Southern Theater Command in a China-India Contingency

Suyash Desai



(Image: *Members of a brigade in the Southern Theater Command's 75th Group Army participate in an exercise in 2020, source: PLA Daily***)**

Introduction

Soon after Xi Jinping assumed charge as the Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman in November 2012, he set the stage for a sweeping military restructuring. On February 1, 2016, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) moved away from the old Soviet-inspired Military Regions (MR) system to the U.S.-inspired Theater Command (TC) model. Under this new model, the seven Military Regions—Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Lanzhou—were reorganized into five geographic TCs, each with a specific "strategic direction" (战略方向). [1]

Following the force restructuring, the three TCs that concern India are the Western Theater Command (WTC) along with Tibet and Xinjiang Military Districts (TMD and XMD), the Southern Theater Command (STC) and the Central Theater Command (CTC). WTC's 76th and 77th Group Armies (GA) under the PLA Army's (PLAA) jurisdiction are mandated to ensure the security of China's land boundaries with Central Asian states, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. The TMD and XMD were retained to oversee security on the Chinese border with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Ladakh, respectively. In addition to the PLAA, the PLA

Air Force (PLAAF), the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and the PLA Logistic Support Force (JLSF) are also significant services under the WTC command, while the PLA Navy (PLAN) plays a minor role at Pangong Tso in the Aksai Chin region. Elsewhere, PLAN forces under the STC's jurisdiction are responsible for securing Chinese interests not only in the South China Sea but also possibly in the Indian Ocean Region and the Western Pacific Ocean. The CTC is mandated to protect the capital but also acts as an anchor to provide additional troops to other theaters in case of a contingency, including WTC. This is an important division of responsibilities for the Chinese armed forces after Xi's recent military reforms. [2]

However, recent developments have highlighted that the STC's 75th Group Army could also play an important role in securing the People's Republic of China's (PRC) territorial integrity in Tibet, especially in the eastern sector bordering the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Furthermore, the troops from the STC's 75th Group Army could be used for rotation in the Tibetan theater, and the 75th GA's artillery could be mobilized during a contingency with India. The four major reasons that the STC's 75th GA could play such a role are improving connectivity between Tibet and the Southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan, minor changes to the 75th GA's force composition, recent military exercises by STC's 75th GA in Tibet and historical precedent.

Improving Tibet-Yunnan Connectivity

China has recently announced the construction of the Bomi-Ranwu (波密-然乌) sections of the Yunnan-Tibet railway ([United Daily News](#), February 9). [3] This railway line will pass through Shangri-La, Dechen, and meet the Sichuan-Tibet railway at Bomi. The line will be extended up to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. On completion, it will connect Kunming, Chuxiong, Dali, Lijiang, Shangri-La, Deqin, Markam, Bomi, Nyingchi, Tsetang, Gonggar and Lhasa (see figure 1). Nyingchi is the closest point on the route to the Indian border, and this line is further integrated with the upcoming wider Tibetan railway network, which runs parallel to the Indian border across Tibet and reaches Hotan in Xinjiang, possibly passing through the disputed Aksai-Chin region. [4]

Figure 1: Chinese Railway Infrastructure Connecting Yunnan and Tibet



The completion of this rail line will reduce the distance from Dali, Kunming, Kaiyuan, and Lancang to Tibet. These cities in Yunnan host the PLA 75th GA's major installations. Dali has a PLA mechanized infantry brigade, Kaiyuan hosts an infantry brigade, Lancang has an infantry brigade and Kunming has infantry, artillery, air defense and armored brigades ([China Brief](#), July 22, 2016). These units were previously part of the 14th Corps, which was later reorganized as the 14 Group Army (GA) before being incorporated into the 75th GA under the STC. The 75th GA is currently garrisoned in the Yunnan province.

The construction of the Tibet-Yunnan railway network will be completed by 2030. Upon its completion, travel time between the two regions will be reduced by half, allowing for quicker mobilization of forces. In comparison to mobilizing forces from the CTC, which acts as a reserve force for every TC, including the WTC, mobilization of the 75th GA to Tibet would be relatively faster. Also, given the relatively high altitude at which troops in the 75th GA are stationed in the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau region, their acclimatization to Tibet's climatic conditions would be relatively easy in comparison to the Beijing-based CTC.

New Capabilities, Changing Force Composition

In addition to benefiting from new infrastructure connecting Tibet and Yunnan, the force composition of the 75th GA is also changing. In December, the PLA commissioned newer rocket launchers, howitzers and anti-aircraft guns for the 75th GA ([Sohu](#), December 9, 2022). This includes the FN-16/Hongying-6B anti-aircraft missile (also called "625" anti-aircraft guns) and 122mm rocket launchers. Earlier in 2022, these new "625" anti-aircraft guns were spotted training in the TMD. This ordinance is mobile, long-ranged and has comprehensive firepower coverage.

Furthermore, the 75th GA's 32nd Mountain combined arms brigade and 123rd heavy combined arms brigade have also recently commissioned Type 15 light battle tanks ([Janes](#), September 22, 2020). In comparison to the Type 99 and Type 96, the two major tank types in the PLA, the Type 15 is significantly lighter, weighing about 32-35 tons. Due to their lightweight and speed, it is easier for such tanks to operate in the plateau region. The first batch of this tank was commissioned with the XMD (South Xinjiang Military Command) bordering the Indian Union Territory of Ladakh near Aksai Chin ([Sohu](#), February 1, 2021). The 75th GA has also added an armored brigade to its inventory in the past two years, bringing the total number of brigades to four. [5] Moreover, the PLA has installed an Air Assault Brigade (AAB) with the 75th Group Army, which could be used in the east (Taiwan/South China Sea) or west (India-China border)—depending upon the requirement ([Institute for National Defense and Security Research \(Taiwan\)](#), January 15, 2021).

Modern equipment like "625" anti-aircraft guns, 122mm rocket launchers, and Type 15 tanks are believed to be generally commissioned with at least a medium-sized combined arms brigade or larger unit. The anti-aircraft guns and rocket launchers are responsible for air defense missions against various low-altitude aircraft, including armed helicopters and small drones. However, such forces are not of major use in the Yunnan region, as the China-Myanmar border is stable, demarcated and not disputed. Although the border region has occasionally been in the news due to insurgencies in Myanmar's Kachin and Shan provinces, such issues primarily concern cross-border infiltration, which falls under the jurisdiction of the border defense units and Chinese People's Armed Police and does not call for the involvement of PLA artillery or air defense units. Thus,

the possible explanation for such explosive firepower with this GA could be for quicker mobilization of forces to Tibet during an escalation on the India-China border.

Recent Military Exercises

Several instances of units with the 75th GA undertaking training-specific routines in Tibet have recently been reported. In November 2021, the 75th GA's air assault brigade conducted a joint flight training on the Western Sichuan Plateau, Southwest China, with an elevation of more than 4,000 meters ([China Military Online](#), November 19, 2021). This was the first time that the brigade's helicopter element held training exercises focusing on all-domain operation capabilities in this region. In May 2022, a 75th GA brigade was also involved in mobilization and acclimatization training for the troops at high altitudes in Tibet ([Sohu](#), May 19, 2022). Furthermore, the 75th GA's air defense brigade and the TMD's army aviation brigade recently conducted joint land-air confrontation training in the region. These are just a few reported instances of the 75th GA's training in the region, occasionally with the TMD. This is an evolving trend and more such instances of STC's 75th GA training in the region, performing mobilization or acclimatization drills or training with TMD or WTC, are possible in the future.

Historical Precedents

Historically, PLA units based out of Kunming have been mobilized during insurgencies in Tibet and have also participated in border problems with India. For instance, elements of the 14th Corps, which was garrisoned in the Kunming MR, were mobilized during the PRC's crackdown on the Tibetan uprising in 1959. [6] The 14th Corps was later reorganized as the 14th Army in 1985 and was one of the four armies under the Kunming and Chengdu MRs to guard China's southwestern flank against India. Troops from the Kunming MR were deployed at the front on the border with India, while the Chengdu MR, currently WTC's headquarters, assumed a reserve role. However, in the 1980s, the Kunming MR was revoked of its designation and the Chengdu MR incorporated some units from the Kunming MR. Thus, there is a historical precedent of mobilization of troops from Kunming during contingencies on the India-China border in Tibet.

Besides these four major reasons, in a recent article on the Chinese website Sohu, there were questions raised if two GAs with WTC—the 76th GA and 77th GA—are sufficient for providing security to the vast geographic scope of WTC ([Sohu](#), January 16). The article's tone indirectly criticized the recent force restructuring and raised questions as to whether these two GAs could manage such a vast geographic region.

Conclusion

Based on these four trends, the STC's 75th GA is likely mobilized on the India-China border in Tibet in the event of a military contingency. The role of the 75th GA remains unclear. It could be used as a backup to WTC in place of CTC. As in the past, it could also be deployed ahead of WTC, and the forces from WTC could be used as reserve forces. The 75th GA's artillery could also play a major role on the India-China border. Moreover, troops with this GA could also be used for rotation, as acclimatization is relatively more straightforward going from Yunnan to Tibet. These possibilities make STC's 75th GA a critical future threat to monitor for India.

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Notes

[1] For more, see Joel Wuthnow and Phillip Saunders, "China's Military Reforms in Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications," *China's Strategic Perspective*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, no. 10 (2017).

[2] For more, see Suyash Desai and Manoj Kewalramani, "Xi's Military Reforms and its Efficacy in Furthering China's National Security Objectives," *India Quarterly*, no 78 (2022).

[3] The Yunnan-Tibet railway is one of the five railways that connect Tibet to the rest of the mainland, and the construction is expected to be completed by 2030 (Other four railways are the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, the Sichuan-Tibet Railway, the Xinjiang-Tibet Railway, and the Gansu-Tibet Railway).

[4] For more, see Suyash Desai, "Civilian and Military Developments in Tibet," *Takshashila Discussion Document*, December 06, 2021, The Takshashila Institution. <https://takshashila.org.in/research/takshashila-discussion-document-civilian-and-military-developments-in-tibet>.

[5] This information is obtained from comparing multiple IISS Military Balance (editions 2015 to 2022).

[6] Chen Jian, "The Tibetan Rebellion of 1959 and China's Changing Relations with India and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, no 8 (Summer 2006): 54–101.