



VOLUME 23 • ISSUE 6 • MARCH 31, 2023

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Central African Republic Mine Attack: Can China Protect its Overseas Nationals?

John S. Van Oudenaren

On March 19, gunmen stormed a gold mine near Bambari, in the heart of the Central African Republic (CAR), killing nine Chinese workers. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) Embassy in the CAR issued successive warnings for Chinese nationals to evacuate all areas outside of Bangui, the capital. After the attack, the Embassy called on Chinese citizens in the CAR’s external provinces to immediately evacuate themselves and report their whereabouts ([PRC Embassy in CAR](#), March 19). A subsequent Embassy warning on March 22 went further, stressing that the situation in the CAR is now “red” or “extremely high risk,” emphasizing that the March 19 attack demonstrated the “extreme necessity of evacuating Chinese companies and nationals” in areas outside the capital “as soon as possible” ([PRC Embassy in CAR](#), March 22). Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin stressed that General Secretary Xi Jinping was closely monitoring the situation and had instructed that immediate action be taken to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals in the CAR and to

“severely punish the murderers” (严惩凶手) ([PRC Foreign Ministry \[FMPRC\]](#), March 20). Exactly who perpetrated the attack remains, however, unclear.



(Image: A truck carrying Russian Wagner Group mercenaries in CAR in 2021, **source:** Corbeau News Centrafrique)

The CAR government faulted the rebel alliance, the Coalition of Patriots for Change, for the gold mine attack. However, the rebel group blamed Russia’s Wagner Group, which has been deployed in the country to protect the central government since 2018 ([South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), March 20). The timing of the attack and subsequent allegations of Wagner’s involvement was inopportune for Xi as he prepared to travel to Moscow the following day for meetings with Russian leader Vladimir Putin, as Beijing sought to position itself as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine War ([Xinhuanet](#), March 21). In a blog post on the CAR attack, the well-known nationalist firebrand and former *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin observed that in “the chaotic situation in CAR anything can happen,” but rejected Western media conjecture concerning the Wagner Group’s involvement as an attempt to “undermine Sino-Russian relations” ([Sohu](#), March 22). He even claimed that due to Wagner’s cooperative relationship with the CAR government, its operators reportedly “helped the authorities deal with the aftermath of the situation and evacuate the bodies of the dead Chinese miners back to Bangui.” Finally, Hu averred that in the “2020s anyone who kills a Chinese national will face severe punishment and retribution.” A post on Tencent echoed these sentiments, stating: “the Central Africa Republic owes us nine lives” before castigating the U.S.-led West for treating Africa as a “modern colonial territory” and creating conditions for “vicious attacks” on Chinese companies to drive them out of emerging markets ([Tencent](#), March 28). Putting aside the murkiness of the March 19 mine attack in the CAR, the incident highlights a growing

problem for China, which is the sheer proliferation of state-owned and private businesses operating overseas, either in conflict zones or in areas with chronic political instability. The population's widespread expectation that the government will exact swift retribution against the perpetrators of attacks on Chinese nationals overseas also puts Xi in a difficult position, as popular assumptions about the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) ability to target armed groups in distant and difficult operational environments do not align with its actual capabilities.

Limited Options

Despite China's expansive global economic footprint and burgeoning military might, the PLA still has limited capacity to conduct complex, joint operations in regions far beyond East Asia. While China is by far the world's second largest military spender, increasing its budget by over seven percent again this year, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police (PAP) have a minimal overseas basing presence, with the only currently operational overseas PLA base in the small Horn of Africa nation of Djibouti ([Ta Kung Pao](#), March 6; [China Brief](#), January 12, 2021). In addition to lack of access, the PLA's ability to deploy forces far from China's borders is also held back by its limited, albeit improving, strategic sealift and airlift capabilities. [1]

Chinese businesses operating overseas usually rely on host nations to ensure a secure operating environment. When this fails, the main option for businesses to ensure their physical security is to employ Chinese Private Security Companies, who often work in conjunction with local security contractors ([Jamestown Foundation](#), January 3). The Foreign Ministry also plays a role in extricating Chinese nationals from conflict zones. PRC diplomats interface with national and local authorities, while embassies and consulates serve as safe harbors and rallying points for nationals. The Foreign Ministry has also sometimes arranged transportation to evacuate Chinese nationals from war zones such as Ukraine in early 2022 and Libya in 2011 ([People's Daily](#), March 25, 2022; [China Brief](#), February 15, 2013). In some cases, for example, during the breakdown of the peace agreement and resumption of civil war in South Sudan, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) chartered planes to evacuate its workers to Sudan ([Xinhuanet](#), July 15, 2016).

Several countries that are major recipients of Chinese investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have created special contingents or directly assigned military units to protect Chinese projects. For example, in 2016, Pakistan established a Special Security Division made up of 9,000 army troops and 6,000 paramilitary personnel responsible for the protection of Chinese workers and projects under CPEC ([Dawn](#), August 12, 2016). In Laos, which received a significant amount of Chinese investment, the military provides security for BRI projects against the threat from the Hmong army, a once widespread but now minor ethnic insurgent group ([USIP](#), November 2018).

Over the past several years, a growing number of Chinese private security companies (PSCs) have begun operating abroad. The ranks of these PSCs, include soldiers and police officers, as well as unskilled recruits from various professional backgrounds. According to Sergey Sukhankin, although China may "boast the world's largest PSC industry in terms of personnel employed, its level of preparedness and sophistication remains incomparably lower than that of its Western counterparts" ([Jamestown Foundation](#), January 3).

In some difficult security environments, such as CAR, Chinese companies have even turned to hiring mercenaries. For example, the head of the local Chamber of Commerce in CAR, He Yaxian said that as the local security situation has deteriorated, private Chinese enterprises in the provinces (outside the capital of Bangui) have recently encountered many security incidents ([Huangjiu](#), March 20). He said some of these companies have hired local mercenaries, but this has not worked out well ([Global Times](#), March 20).

In addition to securing Chinese workers and projects in high-risk areas, the PRC has sought to enhance its ability to evacuate its nationals from conflict or disaster zones. This is one driver of the PLA's efforts to develop its sea and airlift capabilities. The PLA Navy's (PLAN) independently executed (not supplemented by foreign naval forces or chartered civilian craft) a non-combatant evacuation (NEO) of Chinese and foreign nationals from Yemen in 2015 ([China Brief](#), February 25, 2022). The PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) increasing long-range transport capabilities have played a supplemental role in some NEOs and humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) operations, but even purported successes reveal limitations. For example, two indigenously produced PLAAF Y-20 heavy transport planes were dispatched to provide aid to Tonga in January 2022 following a devastating earthquake. Although the Y-20s ultimately reached their destination, they had to stop three times to refuel on the roughly 10,000-kilometer journey from Guangzhou to the Pacific Island nation and delivered a modest 33 tons worth of provisions ([CNA](#), February 16, 2022). This limited strategic airlift capability curbs the PLA's ability to operate abroad, particularly in inland regions or landlocked nations in Africa and Asia, e.g., CAR, South Sudan and Afghanistan, where Chinese nationals have recently been threatened.

A Growing Problem

Over the past few years, Chinese nationals working in Pakistan and Afghanistan have increasingly been targeted by anti-government militant groups. In December, members of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) attacked a Chinese-operated hotel in Kabul, injuring five PRC nationals ([China Brief](#), January 19). In July 2021, a bus bombing by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa killed nine Chinese engineers working on the Dasu hydroelectric project, which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) ([Xinhua](#), July 14, 2021; [Dawn](#), July 14, 2021). In Pakistan's restive southwestern Baluchistan province, separatists have also increasingly targeted PRC interests and nationals, due to preferential treatment of Chinese businesses and Beijing's close ties to the central government in Islamabad ([China Brief](#), January 28 2022). Last April, a female Baluch Liberation Army suicide bomber attacked a Confucius institute in Karachi, killing three Chinese nationals and their local driver ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 20, 2022).

Several countries in Africa, including South Sudan, Somalia and CAR, have also been recurring trouble spots for Chinese enterprises involved in natural resource extraction. In July 2021, a Chinese national and an accompanying government were killed along a major roadway traversing South Sudan ([The Citizen](#), May 27, 2021).

In late 2020, as violence surrounding the elections in CAR increased, the PRC Embassy issued a notice that eight vehicles and other property belonging to Chinese mining companies were looted during fighting between the government and rebel forces in Yaloke in the western part of the country ([Huangjiu](#), December 22, 2020). That same year, two PRC nationals died in a local uprising against a Chinese-operated mine in Sosso

Nakombo in the southwestern region of the country. In 2018, three Chinese workers were killed and one severely injured in Southwestern CAR when a boat accident resulted in the death of a community leader escorting them to a mining site, which sparked an altercation with a group of angry locals ([Africa News](#), March 20). In response, the PRC Embassy in Bangui lodged “stern representations” with the CAR government and the Chinese Ambassador spoke with President Toudera and his lead ministers, urging them to “bring justice and protect the personal safety and other legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens” in CAR ([Xinhua](#), October 6, 2018). The PRC Embassy arranged for the severely injured Chinese worker to receive treatment at the local UN hospital.

Conclusion

The killing of nine Chinese miners in CAR on March 19 highlights a major challenge facing the PRC, which is the widening gap between its expansive economic interests and its minimal overseas security presence. The PRC’s relative inability to safeguard the growing number of Chinese workers and businesses operating abroad is also a major potential domestic audience cost for the Xi Jinping leadership. The public, heavily influenced by officially cultivated patriotic nationalism, is increasingly under the mistaken impression that China is capable of striking back against threats anywhere. In reality, tracking down militant groups, whether in the mountains of Afghanistan or the hills of the Central African Republic, is sure to prove easier said than done.

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Notes

[1] See Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, “[PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability](#),” INSS NDU Strategic Forum 309, May 17, 2021.

Xi Jinping Thought and The End of (Chinese) History

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Xi Jinping greets delegates to the National People's Congress in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 13, source: Xinhuanet)

Soon after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama posited the idea of “the end of history.” In the eyes of Fukuyama and several other Western experts, the evaporation of the influence of the Marxist ideas once propagated by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) provided conclusive evidence that history, defined as humanity’s perennial search for the best model of governance, has reached its conclusion with the liberal model of free elections, laissez-faire economics and the rule of law offering the optimal system. [1]

The latest revision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Constitution enshrines “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (hereafter Xi Jinping Thought) as the perpetual guiding light of the party and state ([Xinhua](#), October 22, 2022). In many ways, this constitutes a CCP declaration that China has resolved its *millennium*-long search for the correct modernization path to achieve national power and prosperity. As a result, Xi’s credo is framed as a fitting end to the quest for Chinese enlightenment, underway since the era of the Guangxu Emperor during the Qing Dynasty in the 1890s. In this official account, Xi Jinping Thought is deemed the culmination of history. According to the 2021 “Resolution of the Central Committee of the CCP on the major achievements and historical experience of the party over the past century,” Xi Jinping Thought constitutes “a new breakthrough in the Sinicization of Marxism” ([Xinhuanet](#), November 16, 2021). “It is the quintessence of the times, which has incorporated [the key progress] of contemporary Chinese

Marxism and 21st Century Marxism as well as [traditional] Chinese culture and the Chinese spirit,” said the party document ([Shandong Evening Post](#), February 3, 2022).

A New Orthodoxy Prevails

As the commentators of the *CCP Construction Net* (党建网) wrote in hagiographical fashion during the 20th Party Congress last October, “Xi Jinping Thought reflects profound historical perspectives and broad feelings about heaven and earth.” The piece claims that “Xi Jinping Thought is the result of deep thinking about the development trends of China and the world as well as the future of mankind.” Moreover, it also states that Xi Jinping Thought has addressed the epochal question, “What is the state of the world? And what should we do?” ([CCP Construction Net](#), October 13, 2022). A recent Xinhua commentary asserted that the Xi leadership has not only eliminated poverty in the country and brought to fruition a relatively well-off society, but has also laid down foundations for the “Great Renaissance of the Chinese Nation.” Xi Jinping Thought has pointed to “new starting points, new directions, and [has led China] to march toward new goals of struggle,” the commentary declares ([Xinhuanet](#), March 5).

The Xi leadership recently brokered a partial reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in early March — and the supreme leader recently discussed a “lasting peaceful solution” to the Russia-Ukraine war with Russian strongman Vladimir Putin in Moscow ([People's Daily](#), March 22; [PRC Foreign Ministry \[FMPRC\]](#), March 10). Meanwhile, Beijing has also touted Xi Jinping Thought to a global audience as the manifestation of “the Chinese way to modernization.” A key theme emphasized by Xi is that each country must forge its own distinct modernization path. In his mid-March speech at the summit between the CCP and dozens of political parties in developing nations, Xi said that “the journey of over 100 years that the CCP has traversed to unite and lead the Chinese people in pursuing national rejuvenation is also an exploration of a path towards modernization.” “Thanks to the unrelenting efforts of generation after generation, China has found its own path to modernization,” he added ([FMPRC](#), March 16). Little doubt exists in the mind of Xi—and like-minded cadres and intellectuals—that so-called “Chinese-style modernization” is underpinned by Xi Jinping Thought.

Xi will likely remain CCP General Secretary until the 22nd Party Congress in 2032—and could stay on as China’s top leader as long as his health permits. He is not likely to allow party ideologues to alter Xi Jinping Thought. This is despite the fact that Xi once laid out the possibility that Chinese socialism could take a further leap forward into the realms of communism. “It is wrong to think that communism is *xuwupiaomiao* [“far-fetched and unrealistic],” Xi said in 2015 ([Sohu.com](#), April 4, 2019; [China Daily](#), October 12, 2015). Yet, as neither Marx, Engels nor Lenin spelled out the details of the utopian project of communism, it is unlikely that Xi would make concrete recommendations as to how Xi Jinping Thought might venture further into this ethereal territory.

More importantly, the General Secretary has stopped discussing how Xi Jinping Thought could be improved, or at least better adapted, to address China’s pressing and constantly evolving socio-economic problems. Xi has urged cadres and CCP members alike to retain total faith in the “path, theory, system and culture” of Chinese socialism, which actually means Xi’s version of socialism ([Chinese Foreign Ministry](#), October 28, 2022). The “leader for life” has highlighted the need for CCP cadres and ideologues to improve in terms of the “self-cleansing, self-perfection, self-revolution and self-elevation” (我净化、自我完善、自我革新、自我

提高) of dogma ([People's Daily](#), December 30, 2022). In an internal speech warning against “subversive errors,” Xi claimed that even if a new theory or policy promised excellent results for the country, it could not be adopted if it adulterated the supremacy of the CCP, including his overriding authority ([People's Daily](#), December 19, 2019). As Xi puts it, his answer to the famous question posed by historian Huang Peiyan in the 1930s—how could ever China rise above the law of “dynastic cycles”—is merely through the CCP’s knack for “self-improvement” and “self-revolution” ([Gov.cn](#), June 29, 2022).

A “One-Voice Chamber”

Whether “the end of (Chinese) history” can be preserved, however, depends on the regime’s ability to put an end to politics. Politics involves competition for power—and give and take—among rival parties or interest groups, or, in the case of the CCP, Machiavellian maneuvering by ambitious leaders to elbow aside opponents. Dr. Sun Yat-sen gave the most-cited definition of politics in the modern era when he defined it as *zhongren zhishi* (众人之事, “the affairs of the people” ([Aisixiang.com](#), December 12, 2011). Sun’s definition presupposes at least a modicum of popular political participation. Politics in the sense of right of the distribution of economic and other interests in the polity presupposes some tension, if not also contention, between the ruling elite on the one hand and other major interest groups among the middle class or “lower classes” on the other. At the 20th Party Congress and the just-ended National People’s Congress, however, Xi and his Xi Jinping faction essentially monopolized all positions in the CCP’s top-level decision-making bodies, the Central Committee, the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and the State Council. Xi has ousted all members of opposition factions within the CCP while simultaneously imposing tight control over civil-society groupings such as liberal intellectuals, human rights lawyers, as well as Christians and Buddhists. One is reminded that at the height of dictator Mao Zedong’s power, the entire country was reduced to a “one-voice chamber” ([Radio French International](#), March 11; [Radio Free Asia](#), March 6).

A top initiative of the “institutional reforms” passed at the NPC earlier this month was to increase the power of the central CCP apparatus at the expense of government bureaucracies ([China Brief](#), March 6). In early March, Xi took additional steps to enhance the party’s stranglehold on power by expanding the powers of the Director of the General Office of the CCP Central Committee Cai Qi, who is also a PBSC member. Cai was concurrently appointed Head of the Xi Jinping Office. Not since the Cultural Revolution, has a PBSC member served as Director of the CCP General Office, which is considered the nerve center of the entire party leadership as it vets reports sent to PBSC members, in particular General Secretary Xi, by both central-level party and government officials, as well as local-level cadres. As is the case with an exceptionally large number of Politburo and PBSC members, Cai was an underling of Xi’s when the latter served as party secretary of the coastal Zhejiang Province ([Radio Free Asia](#), March 20; [United Daily News](#), March 20).

The “leader for life’s” relentless centralization of power begs the question of whether “politics,” as they are generally understood, still exist in China. Moreover, Xi requires total control of the ideological, propaganda, united front and police departments in order to muffle doubts raised by liberal intellectuals and other non-establishment elements as to whether Xi Jinping Thought is the final and best result of the century-long search by Chinese statesmen and men of letters for the most appropriate, effective and democratic system to run China.

The Persistence of Politics...and History

If history is any guide, although the phenomenon of “the end of politics”—meaning an all-powerful supremo stifling all dissent—has taken place many times over the centuries, such periods of mind-numbing and destructive authoritarianism have never lasted too long. The first Emperor Qin Shihuang (259–210 BC), who initially united China and imposed draconian laws to cement his unchallenged authority, ruled for only 11 years ([Chinese-future.org](https://chinese-future.org), June 19, 2022). Despite Xi’s undisputed control over the party, as well as the AI-assisted military and surveillance apparatuses, there has been an upsurge of demonstrations by disgruntled citizens since the middle of last year (China Brief, [November 28, 2022](#); [July 18, 2022](#)). Drivers of popular dissatisfaction have included frustration with Xi’s “zero-COVID” strategy, local banks forbidding depositors from withdrawing funds and sharp cuts to government benefits for retirees. . As the country endures economic rough patches, including declining exports and disappointing consumer spending growth that extends to the purchase of newly built apartments in the key property sector, politics is tipped to return in a big way as the struggle between the ruling party-state apparatus and the millions of Chinese who have suffered much-reduced living standards in the past three years intensifies. And should the supreme leader be forced by political realities to make radical changes to Xi Jinping Thought, the notion that China has reached “the end of history” might also give way.

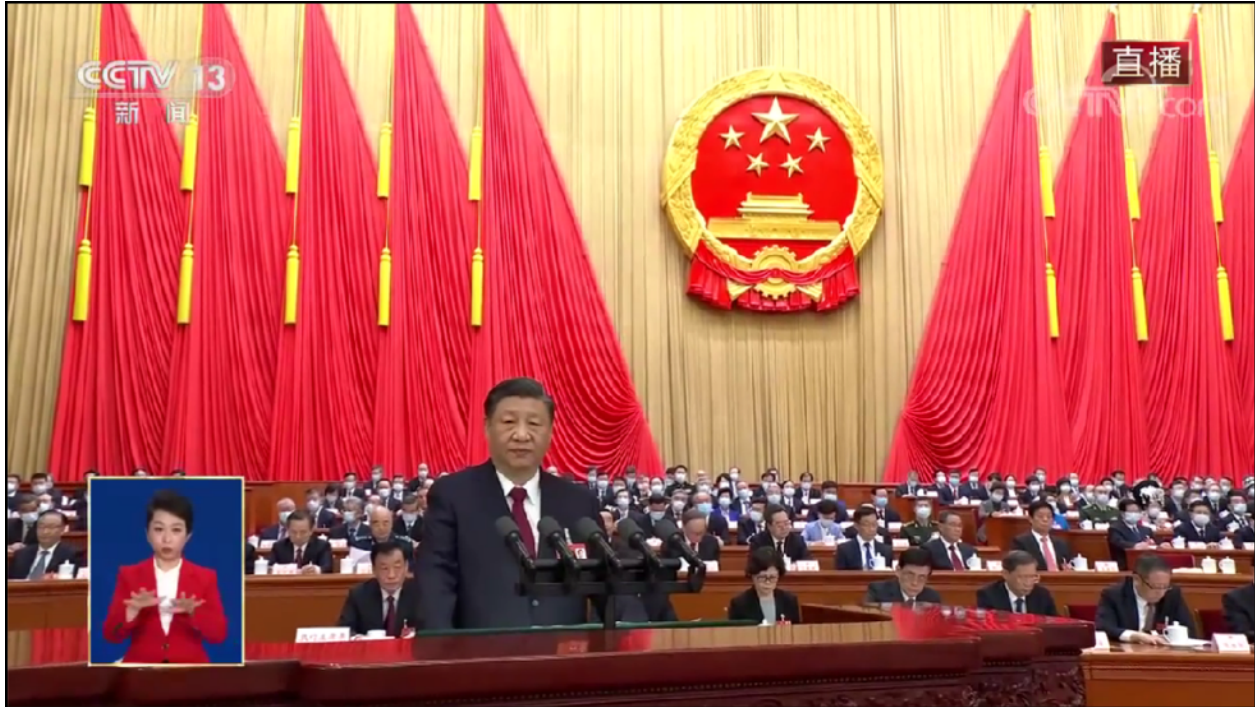
Dr. Willy Wo-Lap Lam is a Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation and a regular contributor to China Brief. He is an Adjunct Professor in the History Department and Master’s Program in Global Political Economy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the author of six books on China, including Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping (2015). His latest book, The Fight for China’s Future, was released by Routledge Publishing in 2020.

Notes

[1] See Francis Fukuyama, “[More Proof That This Really Is the End of History](#),” *The Atlantic*, October 17, 2022; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, The Free Press, 1992).

CCP Narratives on Taiwan at the Two Sessions: Maintaining a “Measured Hardline”

John Dotson



(Image: CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping delivering an address at the closing of the National People's Congress in Beijing on March 13, source: CCTV)

Introduction

In tandem with its increasingly provocative coercive military measures directed against Taiwan, throughout the course of 2022, the People's Republic of China (PRC) also ramped up its accompanying rhetoric. The PRC vigorously reasserted its irredentist sovereignty claims, decried alleged “separatist” activities by Taiwan's political leaders and assailed “interference by external forces” (外部势力干涉); the latter elements are left unnamed but are clearly implied as the United States and other Western countries. One of the most prominent examples of this pattern occurred in August, when the PRC released a new policy white paper titled *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* (台湾问题与新时代中国统一事业) ([Gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), August 10, 2022). This document contained little that was substantively new, but it restated—in even stronger terms than earlier official documents—the PRC's claims over Taiwan ([China Brief](#), September 20, 2022).

These positions have been reiterated in other statements by PRC officials since the release of the white paper, such as the public comments made by PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) at the Munich Security Conference in February. Per the official state media summary, Wang asserted that:

Taiwan has been part of China's territory since the ancient times, and it has never been a state, nor will it ever be... It is not China but the "Taiwan independence" separatist forces who want to change this status quo... "Taiwan independence" separatist activities and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait are as irreconcilable as water and fire. To safeguard peace across the Taiwan Strait, we must resolutely oppose "Taiwan independence," and firmly stay committed to the One-China Principle ([PRC Foreign Ministry \[FMPRC\]](#), February 18).

A key element of context for these hardline messages is that in late 2021 and early 2022, CCP leadership speeches and media commentaries also began to reference the “Party’s Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era” (新时代党解决台湾问题的总体方略). This “plan” has hitherto been only vaguely defined, but purportedly emphasizes united front “people-to-people” exchanges (民间交流) and promised economic inducements—while continuing to spurn any dialogue with Taiwan’s democratically-elected government ([Global Taiwan Brief](#), February 9, 2022).

The CCP’s “Two Sessions” in March 2023

In the first half of March, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (中国共产党) convened its annual Two Sessions (两会) meetings in Beijing ([Xinhua](#), March 13). Arguably the most important event on the PRC’s annual political calendar, the carefully scripted Two Sessions consist of near-simultaneous meetings of the PRC National People’s Congress (全国人民代表大会, NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议, CPPCC). The NPC functions as the PRC’s rubber-stamp legislature, codifying selected CCP policy decisions into national law and confirming personnel appointments made behind closed doors. For its part, the CPPCC operates as a nominal advisory body for the government—“an important channel for socialist consultative democracy” ([CPPCC](#), August 26, 2021)—while providing a veneer of pluralism for CCP one-party rule, and further offering a stage-managed fora for promoting selected CCP propaganda narratives ([China Brief](#), May 29, 2020; [China Brief](#), April 9, 2019).

The Two Sessions this March follow last October’s 20th Party Congress, during which CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平) secured a third term in office and succeeded in filling all of the most senior positions in the party bureaucracy with loyalists ([China Brief](#), October 24, 2022). As a result, this year’s NPC and CPPCC were particularly important for the insights they might offer into the future direction of policy under Xi’s reinforced autocratic rule. As a hot-button political issue, Taiwan is a regular feature of CCP leadership speeches and state media commentary—including the discourse presented at the Two Sessions. In terms of Taiwan policy, this year’s meetings were characterized by continued adherence to what might be called a “measured hardline:” one in which the CCP maintained all its rigid positions while refraining from laying out any new concrete measures to advance its goals.

Li Keqiang’s Work Report and Taiwan Discourse at the NPC

As is standard practice at the National People's Congress (NPC), the PRC state premier—the nominal head of government, but not the party—delivers an official “work report” (工作报告) that touts the government's achievements over the past year and lays out priorities for the year ahead. Li Keqiang (李克强), giving his valedictory address as the outgoing premier, fulfilled this ceremonial role on the opening day of the NPC on March 5. His speech, which was heavy on economic policy, touched only briefly on Taiwan ([China Brief](#), March 6). The mentions of Taiwan provided a *pro forma* reiteration of PRC positions, using well-worn language emphasizing the “One-China Principle” (一个中国原则) and the “92 Consensus” (九二共识). [1] Li stated that:

We must persist in implementing the Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era, persist in the One-China Principle and the "92 Consensus," firmly oppose "independence" and promote unification, promote cross-Straits relations and peaceful development, [and] advance the course of the motherland's peaceful unification. Compatriots on both sides of the Strait are linked by blood, [we must] accelerate cross-Straits economic, cultural [and] exchange cooperation, perfecting and enhancing the system and policies for Taiwan compatriots' welfare; [and] advance cross-Straits commonly-held Chinese culture, [and] with one heart create the great enterprise of national revival ([People's Daily](#), March 6).

It is noteworthy that the proceedings of the 2023 NPC did not include any public discussion of a potential “national unification law” (国家统一法) directed at Taiwan—one that would be intended to bolster the “Anti-Secession Law” (反分裂国家法) passed in 2005 ([FMPRC](#), March 14, 2005). The possibility of enacting such a law had been raised recently—for example, in semi-official state media articles published during the 2021 Two Sessions ([Global Times](#), March 5, 2021). Furthermore, speculation surrounding such a law increased again in the PRC state press prior to the most recent party congress ([Zhongguowang](#), September 22, 2022). However, the omission of a “national unification law” from this year's NPC agenda suggests that this idea remains on hold for now.

Taiwan Discourse at the CPPCC—and the Lack of Any New Ideological Framework

Li Keqiang's NPC speech was mirrored by the March 4 work report of outgoing CPPCC chairman Wang Yang (汪洋). (Wang, like Li, is also a Hu Jintao protégé who was shunted aside at the 20th Party Congress in October and forced on a track to early retirement.) The CPPCC is controlled and carefully stage-managed by the CCP United Front Work Department (*Zhongyang Tongzhan Bu*, 中央统战部), or UFWD, which plays a primary role in the CCP's outreach and cooptation efforts directed at persons and groups in Taiwan. The CPPCC chairman traditionally holds the number four-ranked position in the Politburo Standing Committee, with attendant duties including the overall management of the party's united front policy portfolio.

As such, Wang might have been expected to discuss Taiwan policy. However, Wang's work report, like Li's, was light in this area. As is often the case, Taiwan was mentioned in conjunction with Hong Kong and Macao policy—which Wang predictably praised, while exhorting delegates to uphold the *National Security Law* (国家安全法) and other aspects of Beijing's tightening control over those regions. Wang directly mentioned Taiwan

in only one sentence, calling upon the audience to “participate in commemorating the 75th anniversary of Taiwan's recovery,” to engage with PRC-sponsored “grassroots governance fora” (基层治理论坛) and to “strengthen relations with relevant political parties, organizations and persons” ([CPPCC](#), March 5).

Wang Yang's successor as CPPCC chairman, Wang Huning (王沪宁), delivered a closing address to the CPPCC on March 11. Notably, this speech made no mention of Taiwan (or of Hong Kong and Macao, for that matter). Instead, the speech was characterized by repetitive, obsequious assertions of loyalty to Xi Jinping (whose name was mentioned a total of 15 times) ([CCP News Net](#), March 11). Earlier this year, there had been speculative commentary to the effect that Wang Huning—who has been recognized as a major ghost writer for CCP ideological formulations since the 1990s—had been placed in charge of formulating a new ideological framework to supersede the “One Country, Two Systems” (一国两制) (OCTS) concept first introduced under supreme leader Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) in the late 1970s ([Nikkei Asia](#), January 26). However, no such new ideological formula was unveiled during this year's Two Sessions, and OCTS was still invoked whenever Taiwan was mentioned.

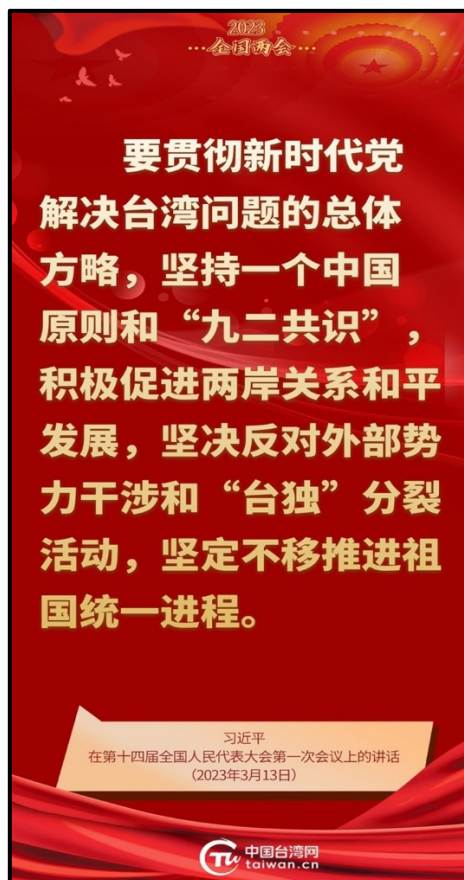


Image: A Chinese state media promotional graphic touting an excerpt from Xi Jinping's March 13 speech before the National People's Congress. The text reads: “[We] must implement the Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era, persist in the One-China Principle and the ‘92 Consensus,’ actively promote the peaceful development of cross-strait relations, [and] firmly oppose interference by external forces and ‘Taiwan independence’ activities, resolutely advancing the process of unifying the motherland.” (Image source: [Taiwan.cn](#), March 13)

Xi's Address to the National People's Congress

As is now *de rigueur* for any major political event in China, pride of place in the Two Sessions was given to CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping. He closed out the NPC proceedings on March 13 with a lengthy “important

speech” (重要讲话) that was covered widely in state media. Reflecting perhaps both Xi’s status and the sensitivity of Taiwan as an issue, Xi devoted significantly more attention to Taiwan in his remarks than lower-ranking figures. In general terms, his speech strongly reiterated the appropriateness of the “One Country, Two Systems” framework for Hong Kong and Macao—and by clear implication, for Taiwan. Regarding Taiwan more directly, Xi stated that:

Achieving the complete unification of the motherland is the common aspiration of all sons and daughters of China, [and] has central significance for national revival. [We] must implement the Party's Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era, persist in the One-China Principle and the “92 Consensus,” actively promote the peaceful development of cross-Straits relations, [and] firmly oppose interference by external forces and “Taiwan independence” activities, resolutely advancing the process of unifying the motherland. ([Xinhua](#), March 13)

It is noteworthy that Xi’s speech did not appear to contain either any new policy initiatives, or any new official phraseology (提法). Instead, it offered a familiar (and highly repetitive) recitation of officially-approved CCP terms and rigid policy positions.

Conclusion

In terms of Beijing’s Taiwan policy, this year’s Two Sessions offered little that was new—although that is, in itself, significant. This year’s events were clearly focused on Xi Jinping’s tightening grip on power and the increasing centralization of government functions under the “party center” (党中央). In recent years, the “Two Sessions” have been used to signal forthcoming policy initiatives—for example, the messaging during the 2020 events that presaged Beijing’s crackdown on Hong Kong ([China Brief](#), May 29, 2020). However, as far as Taiwan is concerned, there was little clear signaling this year—and no apparent further elucidation of the party’s much ballyhooed, but vague, “Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era.”

All of this appears to indicate continuation of a “measured hardline” in CCP policy towards Taiwan: one that adheres to existing rigid positions, but that does not—at least for the moment—levy new demands, or set deadlines for compliance with Beijing’s terms for “reunification.” This in turn suggests that Beijing’s policy towards Taiwan in the coming year will see significant continuity with what was observed in 2022: refusal to engage with “separatist” leaders in Taiwan; sustained military coercive pressure and psychological operations targeting Taiwan’s population; and continuation of united front outreach-cum-cooptation efforts directed towards businesspeople and other selected groups in Taiwan. Continuity, albeit with the prospect of gradually escalating pressure, is the most likely course for the PRC’s Taiwan policy throughout the remainder of 2023.

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Notes

[1] The “One-China Principle” (一个中国原则) is Beijing’s term—promoted aggressively in international discourse—for the idea that there can be only one Chinese state, and that this is the People’s Republic of

China. The “92 Consensus” (九二共识) is a formulation originating in CCP and Kuomintang negotiations in the 1990s, during which the two sides reached a vague agreement that both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland belonged to “one China,” but with differing interpretations of that meaning—i.e., whether the “one China” referred to the Republic of China (ROC), or the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Over the past year, the PRC has insistently demanded that any Taiwan interlocutors affirm the “92 Consensus”—the interpretation of which the CCP is attempting to shift towards affirmation of full PRC sovereignty over Taiwan. For a fuller discussion of this, see: John Dotson, “The CCP Commemorates the 30th Anniversary of the ‘1992 Consensus’—and Seeks to Change Its Meaning” (*Global Taiwan Brief*, September 21, 2022), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2022/09/the-ccp-commemorates-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-1992-consensus-and-seeks-to-change-its-meaning/>.

Wang Yi's European Tour: China Seeks a Trans-Atlantic Wedge

Bartosz Kowalski



(Image: Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Wang Yi answers questions after delivering keynote remarks at this year's Munich Security Conference in Germany, source: FMPRC)

Introduction

On February 14, China's senior-most diplomat, Politburo member and Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission Wang Yi embarked on a week-long tour of Europe, which culminated with a stop in Russia that paved the way for General Secretary Xi Jinping's recently completed visit to Moscow. On his way to Russia, Wang Yi visited three of the EU's founding members, namely, France, Italy, Germany, where he attended the Munich Security Conference, as well as Hungary, which opposes EU sanctions against Russia ([Mingpao](#), February 18). Wang Yi's tour indicates that China is currently pursuing two main objectives in its European diplomacy: restore economic and trade contacts negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and drive a wedge in trans-Atlantic unity with regards to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Mending Economic Fences, Playing to European Desires for "Strategic Autonomy"

In his conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron, Wang Yi said that China and France wanted to breathe new life into Sino-European relations and pledged to jointly work with his European counterparts to solve global problems. When discussing the "Ukraine problem," the term persistently used by Chinese officials

for Russia's all-out war against Ukraine, Wang played on Paris's attachment to the idea of strategic autonomy and its aspiration to play a key role in resolving Moscow's conflict with Kyiv. Having noted the "mantra" of China's impartiality as an advocate for negotiations and peace, Wang stated that "China attaches great importance to France's role as a "major independent country" (独立自主的大国) and is willing to work with the international community, including France, to reach a political solution to achieve a truce as soon as possible" in the Russia-Ukraine war ([Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China \[FMPRC\]](#), February 16).

In the same vein, Wang Yi spoke with President Macron's foreign policy advisor Emmanuel Bonn, assuring him that China is ready to re-establish institutional dialogue with France in three areas (strategic, financial and people-to-people), strengthen cooperation in the civil use of nuclear technology, aerospace, health care, tourism and agriculture as well as to deepen cooperation in third-country markets. These Chinese efforts to re-engage with Europe have seemingly found fertile ground, as France declared that it would actively participate in the upcoming high-level Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. The "Ukraine crisis" (乌克兰危机) was also discussed along with a range of other global issues, with China and France reaching a "broad consensus" ([FMPRC](#), February 17).

Wang Yi's next destination was Rome, where he held talks with Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani on strengthening bilateral relations and restoring economic cooperation disrupted by the pandemic. Wang Yi also stated the importance of Italy's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2019, Italy was the first (and so far only) G7 country to sign a memorandum to participate in China's global infrastructure development initiative and also assured Tajani that China wanted to cooperate with Italy on green and digital technologies, as well as develop cooperation in third-country markets ([China Brief](#), April 24, 2019). Addressing concerns raised by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni at last year's G20 summit, Wang Yi declared China's willingness to increase imports of Italian goods and facilitate the expansion of Italian companies in the domestic Chinese market ([China Brief](#), December 8, 2022). Largely repeating the arguments he made in France, Wang Yi stressed that China appreciated Italy's "international status and influence," and presented China as an advocate for peace and a negotiated solution to the "Ukraine problem" ([FMPRC](#), February 17). The Chinese side's efforts were apparently favorably received once again. According to the Italian Foreign Ministry, Minister Tajani urged China to pressure Russia into reaching a "just peace" and did not doubt China's commitment to playing "a fundamental role in achieving peace" ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Italy](#), February 16).

Interestingly, when Wang Yi was courting France and Italy, the *People's Daily* published an article by French economist Jean-Marc Daniel, criticizing U.S. protectionism against European industries under the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and pointed to the "decreasing trust between the US and the EU" ([People's Daily](#), February 17).

In Munich, Wang Yi met with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to discuss reinvigorating China-Germany economic ties and addressing the "Ukraine crisis." Regarding the latter, Wang Yi said that "both China and Germany are independent major countries" and should jointly work for peace. On the same day, Wang Yi met with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, explaining that China understands European concerns over

“the Ukraine crisis,” and warning that a prolonged crisis would subject Europe to more negative consequences, with the bombing of the Nord Stream pipeline being an illustration of this ([FMPRC](#), February 18). In fact, three days later, the Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, backed Russia’s draft resolution at the Security Council over the investigation into the sabotage of Nord Stream pipelines, citing what China viewed as the impact on the environment and energy shortages for European consumers during the winter season ([China Mission to the UN](#), February 21).

Wang Yi’s remarks at the Munich Security Conference touched on similar themes. Reiterating Beijing’s assertion of its commitment to peace talks, the senior Chinese diplomat made it clear that some forces (*ergo*, the U.S.) are not interested in ending hostilities through successful peace negotiations. He stressed, “they care nothing for the lives of Ukrainian people and the destruction of Europe,” pursuing only their own “greater strategic goals” ([FMPRC](#), February 18). Days later, Beijing released a twelve-point document calling for a “political settlement” to the “Ukraine crisis,” beginning with a call for all parties to respect national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This was immediately followed in the document, however, by a point contending that all parties must abandon the “Cold War mentality” and avert “bloc confrontation,” thereby assigning primary culpability for hostilities to the U.S. and NATO ([FMPRC](#), February 24), which was also a recurring theme of the Xi-Putin talks in Moscow in the following month ([FMPRC](#), March 21). This builds on the Wang’s repeated references at Munich and elsewhere to “European strategic autonomy” and the need to create a new security architecture in Europe to achieve lasting peace, which marks a return to the Chinese narrative from the beginning of the war. Echoing the Kremlin’s rhetoric, Beijing at the time regularly pointed to NATO enlargement as the main cause for the outbreak of conflict and the indispensability of developing a new security formula that took Russia’s interests into account ([People’s Daily](#), April 19, 2022). In other words, China wants the war to end without Russia’s defeat.

A Friendly Stop in Hungary

Prior to arriving in Moscow, Wang Yi stopped over in Hungary, the EU’s most China-friendly regime and a leading pro-Russian voice in the EU. Hungary is also one of the key proponents of the BRI and the first European country to join the Chinese initiative ([FMPRC](#), June 6, 2015). Relations between the two countries grew even closer recently with the establishment of the Sino-Hungarian Council for the Belt and Road Cooperation ([Chinese Embassy to Hungary](#), December 13, 2022).

At his meeting with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Wang Yi asserted that, together with Hungary, China wanted to actively “promote the democratization of international relations and multipolarization of the world,” thus replicating the Sino-Russian narratives against the U.S.-led liberal international order ([People’s Daily](#), February 21). Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, China and Hungary agreed that Europe’s long-term interests should guide the resolution of the crisis and that peace should be reached as soon as possible. The following day, Wang met with Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó and said that Hungary is China’s closest friend in Europe. Wang Yi assured the Hungarian administration that Beijing will continue its friendly policy towards Budapest, which, he stated, conducts its domestic and foreign policy based on its own national interests. He also said that, together with Hungary and other “peace-loving countries,” China would strive to achieve a ceasefire and long-lasting peace ([FMPRC](#), February 21).

Laying the Groundwork for Xi's Mission to Moscow

During his meeting with Vladimir Putin, Wang Yi said that China-Russia relations are rock solid and that the strategic partnership between Beijing and Moscow has never targeted any third country and would not be interfered with by other countries ([FMPRC](#), February 22). On the same day, Wang Yi spoke with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, assuring the Russian official that regardless of the development of the international situation, Beijing would like to maintain with Moscow “the positive dynamics of the development of a new type of great power relationship” ([FMPRC](#), February 22). Wang also met with the head of the Russian Security Council and one of the main architects of the invasion of Ukraine, Nikolai Patrushev, putting forward the usual elements of the Sino-Russian narrative, including “opposing bloc rivalry” and “working on the democratization of international relations and multipolarization of the world” ([FMPRC](#), February 22).

Some Chinese observers speculated that placing Russia at the end of Wang Yi's itinerary was not driven by any intention to shun the Kremlin, as the two countries are brothers in arms (*zhanyou*, 战友) and strategic partners. Rather, the timing was to avoid attracting additional scrutiny from the EU and the US in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Although China does not have the capabilities to persuade Europe to abandon the U.S. and to reverse Europe's policy toward Russia, it does want the EU to be open to cooperating with China and not allow the EU to be what it sees as being overly dependent on the U.S. (“not hang itself on Uncle Sam's tree”, 别吊死在山姆大叔一棵树上) ([Sohu](#), February 16). In fact, putting Russia as the last stop on Wang Yi's diplomatic tour may well suggest that the Chinese diplomat shared some of the insights he gained in Western Europe with Kremlin officials, especially regarding Ukraine. Apparently, for the same reason, Poland and any other Central and Eastern European country actively involved in helping Ukraine were omitted from Wang's itinerary. Suffice it to say, while Wang Yi was visiting Western European capitals on his way to Moscow, Xi Jinping hosted the Iranian President Raisi in Beijing, with U.S. President Biden visiting Ukraine and Poland.

In retrospect, Wang's February stopover in Moscow can be seen as laying the groundwork for Xi's visit to Russia in March, during which both parties agreed to deepen their “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”, a decision which Xi justified as “China's strategic choice based on its own fundamental interests and the general trend of world's development” ([FMPRC](#), March 21). Furthermore, Sino-Russian top-level talks in Moscow confirmed that the basic denominator of the two countries' deepening cooperation is to build a counterweight to the United States, the Western alliance system and the liberal international order. This is reflected in the Sino-Russian joint statement, which overtly expressed both countries' opposition against the U.S.-led security alliances in Europe and Indo-Pacific. China and Russia had also reserved their rights to define “democracy” and “human rights” on their own terms, and deemed purported U.S. efforts “to replace generally accepted principles and norms of international law with a ‘rules-based order’” unacceptable ([FMPRC](#), March 22).

China Seeks to Disrupt Europe-U.S. relations

Evaluating the impact of the Ukraine crisis on European security, Nanjing University scholar Zheng Chunrong pointed out that it was mainly due to Germany and France's economic considerations vis-à-vis China that the

language in the document regarding China adopted at the NATO Madrid summit in 2022 was softened. This was despite attempts by the U.S. and the UK to employ more aggressive rhetoric against Beijing ([Aisixiang](#), January 30). Fang Zhongping, an expert from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, noted the differences between Hungary, the US and most of the EU countries over Ukraine. Although NATO seized the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine to reinstate its role in Europe, the idea of European strategic autonomy has not been abandoned, as was reflected in the pronouncements of President Macron and Chancellor Scholz ([Aisixiang](#), February 24).

The same logic was reflected in Wang Yi's interview with Chinese media upon the conclusion of his European diplomatic tour. Wang posited that China, the EU and its national leaders should work together on the political settlement of "the Ukraine problem" while eliminating "external interference" ([FMPRC](#), February 23). A *China Daily* editorial on Macron's forthcoming April visit to China was far more unequivocal in insisting that the EU should coordinate peace mediation efforts with China while preserving the European bloc's "strategic independence" from the U.S. ([China Daily](#), February 26). To this end, it cited President Biden's dismissive reaction to Chinese proposals as the best illustration of how accurately the Chinese document addressed the solution to the conflict. Indeed, Wang Yi's recent efforts have tried to placate European concerns over China's diplomatic, political and economic support for Russia. Positioning itself as a supposed impartial arbiter of European affairs, China attempts to lay the groundwork for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Ukraine primarily in line with China's (and Russia's) interests. The aim of these actions is to fracture (or at least weaken) the transatlantic security architecture while maintaining robust economic cooperation with the EU.

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Beyond Arms and Ammunition: China, Russia and the Iran Back Channel

Sine Ozkarasahin



(Image: General Secretary Xi Jinping arrives in Moscow for a state visit on March 20, **source:** Xinhua)

Introduction

Along with Iran's increasing involvement in supplying Russia's war effort against Ukraine, a potential increase in Chinese support for Russia presents a challenge for both Kyiv and NATO ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), March 6). Indeed, Western governments have recently expressed alarm over China's potential provision of dual-use or military equipment to Russia ([U.S. Department of Defense](#), February 28). According to U.S. intelligence, Chinese arms transfers to Russia would probably take the form of artillery and drones ([Straits Times](#), February 26). As both items are badly needed by Russia to sustain its war efforts, the entry of Chinese arms on the Ukrainian battlefield may drastically shift the balance of power in the ongoing conflict. However, in addition to trackable military aid packages, Chinese assistance is manifesting itself more subtly in ways that are often overlooked. Consequently, a forthcoming Chinese aid package to Russia is likely to take several forms.

Can Chinese Financial Aid and Investment Resuscitate Russia's Fortunes in Ukraine?

With a long history, the burgeoning trade relationship between China and Russia are hardly news. Over the past two years, however, economic and trade ties between the two countries have deepened, despite the

Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine last February. Currently, energy, minerals, machinery, automobiles, electronics, nuclear fuel and reactors are among the robust areas of trade ([China Daily](#), March 20). During President Xi Jinping's March 20-22 state visit to Moscow, the two sides agreed to sign joint statements on "Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era" and the "Pre-2030 Development Plan on Priorities in China-Russia Economic Cooperation" ([PRC Foreign Ministry \[FMPRC\]](#), March 22). In their joint statement on the pre-2030 development plan on priorities in China-Russia economic cooperation, both parties pledged to increase trade ties, deepen cooperation in key areas, energy and agriculture, and expand financial cooperation, notably including by increasing "the proportion of local currency settlement" (i.e., yuan or ruble) in trade or investment transactions ([State Council Information Office](#), March 22).

Since Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, China-Russia relations have greatly deepened. This phenomenon was most visible in the cooperation agreements and joint projects signed over the past few years, as well as the significant increase in bilateral trade since 2021. Wary of this trend, the U.S. has criticized the close relations between its strategic rivals. In response, Beijing has claimed that the U.S. has "no right to point fingers at China" and asserted that Washington should stay out of China-Russia relations ([Global Times](#), December 31, 2022). As Moscow turns to new options to sustain its invasion of Ukraine, the improving relationship between the two countries becomes increasingly troublesome for the West as well as the future of the ongoing war.

According to official sources, in 2022, the total China-Russia trade volume increased by around 30 percent, year-on-year, hitting a record high of \$190 billion ([TASS](#), January 13; [South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), December 22, 2022). Pending plans seek to further increase bilateral trade, including by settling logistical problems (e.g., railroad capacity) and improving cross-border transport. At present, the two sides are exploring establishing new trade routes to connect additional port cities and deploy more container ships to facilitate connectivity. By opening up new channels of transport, this initiative will potentially expand the trade volume between the countries ([Silk Road Briefing](#), August 5, 2022).

In addition to deepening mutually beneficial trade relations, China also offers Russia significant financial aid. The two countries have their own respective cross-border payment systems, and collaborate on various joint projects within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In addition, Russia's state sector is a major recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) ([Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education](#), September 1, 2022). Moscow has largely embraced this close partnership with Beijing, placing hopes that forthcoming economic and financial assistance from China will lend essential support to Russia's war with Ukraine ([Lenta](#), March 16, 2022). As Russia's financial resources are running low under the crippling impact of Western sanctions and a prolonged war, Chinese hot money might provide the Kremlin with a real lifeline.

Will Chinese Artillery and Drones Tip the Balance in Ukraine?

As the Ukrainian conflict has become an artillery-driven war of attrition with multiple frontlines, stocks on both sides are already becoming exhausted. While NATO is trying to ramp up production to meet rising demand from Ukraine, Russia is turning to alternative sources to replenish its rapidly deteriorating arsenal and maintain high-tempo artillery firepower superiority over Ukraine.

Russia's current operational challenges call for two military assets in particular, where China can come into play; artillery, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Faced with a significant lack of ammunition, artillery support would boost the capabilities of the Russian Armed Forces and support Russian advances. For the past few months, a shortage of ammunition has been a major bottleneck for Russian offensives. On February 17, Wagner commander Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed that the group's access to ammunition is severely restricted, with some fighters "completely cut off from [ammunition] supplies" ([Gazeta.ru](https://www.gazeta.ru), February 17). Some local sources claim that this was also a major issue that hindered the Russian offensive in Bakhmut ([Topwar.ru](https://topwar.ru), March 7). Western intelligence believes that the potential artillery aid that China could send includes 122 mm and 155 mm rounds, which Russia needs most. [1]

In addition to supplying Russia with ammunition for its artillery attacks, drone warfare is also gaining increased importance on the battlefields of Ukraine. As Ukraine is skillfully targeting Russian logistics lines (e.g., supply trains) as well as high-value targets such as command-and-control stations and S-300V4 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems ([Ukraine Weapons Tracker](https://www.ukraine-weapons-tracker.com), March 9), Russia needs to step up its game in drone warfare to counter this threat. If used smartly, Chinese drones can enhance Moscow's intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR) capabilities at a low price. As the costs of indigenous drone production soar due to Western sanctions and difficulty accessing spare parts, Chinese UAVs could provide Russia with a cheap and effective alternative.

Chinese Components in Iranian Military Systems

So far, China's reticence to send ammunition to support the Russian Armed Forces have mainly been rooted in political concerns. Therefore, should it decide to support Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, Beijing would likely opt to do so in a largely clandestine manner. Now that Iran is involved, China might have found itself a back channel to funnel support to Russia. The Sino-Farsi military relations date back to the mid-1930s and over the past few years, the two countries have grown closer. Earlier this month, China brokered a deal to restore normal diplomatic relations between Iran and its long-time geopolitical rival, Saudi Arabia ([Xinhua](https://www.xinhuanet.com), March 11).

Beijing also plays a key role in the design and manufacturing of some Iranian military assets. In fact, the U.S. recently sanctioned five Chinese firms for supplying Iran with drone parts ([81 UAV.cn](https://www.81uav.cn), March 10). While slightly late, the decision was not unfounded. At present, a large number of Tehran's military systems include Chinese engines or subcomponents. For example, the engine of the infamous Shahed-136 is made by a Chinese firm called MicroPilot Flight Control Systems ([Institute for Science and International Security](https://www.instituteforscienceandinternationalsecurity.org), October 31, 2022). The Shahed-131's engine is built domestically in Iran; however, it is a reverse-engineered copy of another system by the same company. The engines of these drones are either produced in China or are based on designs sold by their Chinese manufacturers to Iran. These designs are often heavily based on European technologies, which allow Iran to build engines and systems that mimic these advanced military assets. Therefore, China not only supports Tehran's defense-industrial base, but also grants it indirect access to Western military designs. In other words, for decades, China was the middleman that carried Western technology to Iran. Now Tehran acts as a conduit, providing these capabilities and technical know-how to Russia in its war with Ukraine.

As it seeks to leverage its position, Tehran appears willing to shoulder some of the burden for Beijing of funneling further military and financial support from China to Russia. In this way, China can avoid further Western sanctions while still managing to provide Russia with sorely needed assistance. By hiding behind Iran, which already has systems that the Russians actively use on the battlefield, China seeks to maintain its global image and reputation by indirectly supporting Moscow rather than openly siding with it. Therefore, this strategy will not only allow China to help its partner in crime, Russia, in a low-profile fashion, but it will also help its efforts to cultivate an image as a new type of great power, that is impartial and committed to resolving global conflict.

Conclusion

Until recently, Beijing has maintained a careful balancing act on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As seen in its recent twelve-point peace plan document, China has no intentions of becoming directly involved in the conflict ([FMPRC](#), February 24). In the rapidly changing world order, China will need to play smart and maintain relations with both sides, the West and Russia, based on its own interests.

In Ukraine, Beijing knows that Russia is not the winning horse. Therefore, it is also well aware that putting all its bets on Russia is probably a bad idea. However, supporting Russia prolongs the current war of attrition, which is exhausting Western military resources. A weaker NATO would serve Chinese interests, especially in a potential confrontation over Taiwan. Consequentially, China's primary interest is not in ensuring that Russia wins but in making certain it does not lose. In order to maintain the status quo, Beijing might be willing to step up its aid, even if it means hiding behind Iran, or resort to more "silent" non-military means (i.e., providing financial support) of assistance to Russia in order to protect its geostrategic interests.

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Notes

[1] Ellen Nakashima, John Hudson and Karen DeYoung, "[China considers sending Russia artillery shells, U.S. officials say](#)," *Washington Post*, February 24, 2023.