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Contradictions Within The PRC's Climate Strategy

by Arran Hope



Ding Xuexiang at COP28. (Source: [HK01](#))

The 28th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) drew to a close earlier this week ([UNEP](#), December 13). The COP meetings always produce a mixture of successes and disappointments, and only constitute a portion of the myriad processes that impact the global energy transition and race to stabilize the planetary system. This year's conference was no different. The People's Republic of China (PRC) was actively engaged throughout, hosting a variety of events at their pavilion reflecting the breadth and depth of the country's critical engagement with the issues ([National Climate Strategy Center](#), November 28). However, the PRC's is still appraised as falling far short of what is required to meet the Paris climate goals and is not commensurate with its position in the international system ([Climate Action Tracker](#), November 22). This year, the PRC ranks first in the world for total annual emissions, and second in both cumulative (historical) emissions and GDP. Meanwhile, it has failed to advance its ambitions or provide leadership to match its rhetoric of being—to use Xi Jinping's words from his Party Congress speech—an “important participant, contributor, and torchbearer” in addressing climate change ([Xinhua](#), November 3, 2017).

The PRC delegation constituted the joint-third largest at the conference, and was led by Zhao Yingmin (赵英民), vice-minister at the Ministry of Environment and Ecology (MEE). Also present were minister Huang Runqiu (黄润秋), special climate envoy Xie Zhenhua ([解振华](#)), and UN under-secretary-general for economic and social affairs Liu Zhenmin (刘振民), who is expected to replace Xie as he steps down after

25 years as the PRC's top climate negotiator. Crucially, Executive Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥), a Politburo Standing Committee member who holds real power over China's climate policy (in a way that the MEE officials do not), also attended.

There has been a lot of positive energy from the Chinese media in the run up to, and during, the conference ([People's Daily](#), November 17; [People's Daily](#), December 14). From a PRC perspective, this is likely to continue following the conference too—not least because the final draft of the global stocktake satisfied China's key policy goals. There was no reference to a “fossil fuel phase-out,” while there are calls for “tripling renewable energy capacity” and transitioning away from fossil fuels in a “just, orderly and equitable manner.”

Ding signalled early on that he was not interested in making any ambitious commitments this year, arguing in an interview that it is developed countries who need to step up, and that “China has always kept its promises and made important contributions to global climate governance” ([Xinhua](#), December 2). This was echoed by Zhao, who said “emphasized ... the principles of equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, and respective capabilities ... [as] the cornerstones of the global climate governance process,” and praised the results as being “in line with the concept of ecological civilization advocated by China (符合中方倡导的生态文明理念)” ([Xinhua](#), December 15). This rehashing of obsolete talking points suggests that Beijing's will pursue a strategy that prioritizes its own security and economic stability, and will continue to withstand pressure from the international community to orient towards more ambitious goals.

Internationally, the PRC conceives of itself as having a leading role, particularly with a view to the developing economies of the global south—the Global Development Initiative includes climate change and green development as one of eight areas of focus ([MFA](#), October 18; [Global Times](#), December 30, 2021). However, the decision to categorize itself as a developing country—and thus avoid higher responsibilities under the rubric of “common and differentiated responsibilities”—indicates that the PRC's stance on climate change does not allow it to shoulder the responsibilities that flow from global leadership. For instance, the decision not to contribute to the loss and damage fund which will provide assistance to developing countries that are already being disproportionately impacted by climate change, and its blocking of any language pertaining to “phasing out” fossil fuels, is in stark contrast with its self-proclaimed status as defender of the interests of the global south ([UNFCCC](#), December 13). Another difficulty is the PRC's insistence that concessions on climate cooperation cannot be unbundled from other issue areas. Hence the comprehensive halt on such cooperation with the United States following former house speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 ([People's Daily](#), August 25, 2022).

Domestically, the PRC has produced a bewildering number of policy documents, regulations, and other governance tools in the last decade to steer the country onto a greener path. The Third Plenum of 2013 signalled that environment was a key area that underpinned economic reform, and “Ecological Civilization (生态文明)” was enshrined in the 12th Five Year Plan (2011–2015). Just within the last few weeks, the Central Economic Work Conference week signalled the emphasis on accelerating green technologies ([Xinhua](#), December 12); and the National Development and Reform Commission recently announced 35 peak-carbon pilot zones across 15 provinces ([NDRC](#), December 6). Greener growth is clearly a priority for

Xi, even if it arises from purely strategic reasons, and his emphasis on this issue has arguably shifted the needle in a positive direction ([USCC](#), March 17, 2022). The dramatic contributions that Chinese firms have made to solar, wind, battery technology, and electric vehicles have been one of the most important stories of the global energy transition to date, though these are often disturbingly entangled with human rights abuses ([SHU](#), November).

Key obstacles remain, however, including China's obstinate reliance on coal-fired power (CFP). In 2022, the coal output of one province—Shaanxi—was roughly equivalent to that of India. In fairness, measures are being undertaken, such as a recent policy from both NDRC and NEA to provide annual capacity payments to CFP plants to help them transition to provide flexible ramping capacity, rather than constituting the primary source in the energy mix ([NDRC](#), November 8). But policy tools used to date betray a worrying lack of ability to keep coal combustion in check. Despite China's political system's unusually high level of coercive power, it often exhibits comparatively weak enforcement effectiveness when it comes to dealing with excessive emissions. This often leads to “blunt force regulation,” whereby central government officials force local bureaucrats to comply with environmental policies and targets that otherwise would not be implemented by shutting down factories for extended periods ([Made In China Journal](#), 2023). Such methods are a costly resort and a reminder of Beijing's sometimes constrained toolkit when faced with significant interests groups.

Enormous work still remains to be done on constructing a more integrated power grid that breaks down provincial boundaries and allows for a more liberalized power market. The coal industry is also a powerful interest group that stymies reform. It is a large employer with backers in many constituencies from local officials and state-owned enterprises. Even Chinese experts equivocate on whether China should build more CFP plants: “Should China build more coal-fired plants? That depends... In the short term ... it's irreplaceable” ([The Paper](#), December 12).

Recent projections argue that the world is “very likely” to see temperature increases of 2.0 to 4.0°C by 2100, and suggest that achieving the targets laid out in Paris in 2015 are almost impossible ([Rhodium Group](#), November 30; [IMF](#), November 21). By framing climate change as an issue of security—national security, energy security, food security, resource security, social stability—China has made significant progress in recent years. But China is also attempting to affect simultaneous transitions to both a greener economy and a different economic model ([Chartbook](#), November 15). Even if the PRC's direction of travel is becoming clearer, assessments indicate that solutions remain to be found to the slow pace of change, leaving open questions about the repercussions on China's domestic political economy, as well as its status on the global stage.

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PLA Air Force Increases Flexibility of Combat Support Units

by Derek Solen



PLA Army helicopters prepare to take off from an airbase of the Eastern Theater Air Force on October 22, 2023. (Source: China Military Online)

In early November, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) published photographs of army helicopters taking off from an “air force station” of the Eastern Theater Command during a “trans-regional operation” in late October ([China Military Online](#), November 10). “Air force station” likely refers to the “field station” or combat support unit that services the airbase from which the helicopters took off. The photographs visually substantiate an article from June in which it was reported that all the field stations of an unspecified air defense base of the Eastern Theater Air Force had developed the capability to conduct joint combat support. The report mentioned that the field stations were servicing aircraft of various types from different services, even including a vignette of one field station conducting “combat sustainment” for an army helicopter in addition to servicing fighters and special mission aircraft ([PLA Daily](#), June 16). The field stations’ actual joint combat support capability is likely to be nascent, but it rests on a foundation of greater flexibility that the field stations have achieved over the past decade to operate outside their routines and to service various types of aircraft. That foundation should also make the combat support units of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) a more resilient force that is better able to support agile aviation units.

Clarifying Bases and Stations

The PLAAF's air defense bases (空防基地) are commands, not installations. They combine multiple units from different branches of the PLAAF (aviation, radar, air defense, communications) under a single command that regularly trains to deploy and to fight as a combined-arms team. Similarly, field stations (场站) are units, not facilities. They are the highest-level formations providing combat support to an air defense base's aviation units. Specifically, field stations administer airbases, provide fuel and ordnance, and conduct air traffic control, among other responsibilities. Put simply, field stations enable the PLAAF's aviation units to fly.

How Field Stations Have Built Combat Support

The report in question was published in *PLA Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission, which is roughly equivalent to the US Department of Defense ([PLA Daily](#), June 16). The article was typically long on vague allusions and short on useful details. In line with *PLA Daily's* didactic purpose, the article focused on how the air defense base has approached building its joint combat support capability instead of on the types and degree of joint combat support that its field stations can provide.

The field stations did not take a simple additive approach to expanding the types of aircraft that they can service. The article quoted a staff officer at one field station saying that the expansion of their capabilities required structural reorganization, not merely the "simple combination of models for servicing single types of aircraft." Therefore, the same field station has established different types of combat support groups, such as a "frontline specialized unit" group, a group to service mixed formations of dissimilar aircraft, and a "maximally streamlined" group ([PLA Daily](#), June 16). One can only speculate that the first and last groups are deployable groups servicing aircraft in combat zones and at austere airstrips, respectively. In the past the PLAAF has experimented with mobile field stations and attempted to "gauge [combat] units' minimum combat support needs in wartime" ([China Brief](#), September 10, 2021). According to the *PLA Daily* report, the field stations took a similar approach to the storage of materiel. Rather than storing vast amounts of materiel for every contingency, they have opened "channels for the rapid supply of jet fuel, ordnance, and materiel" with "neighboring airfields" in case of emergencies.

It is possible that other services have deployed personnel to assist the field stations with joint combat support. Although the field stations sent their own personnel to other operational units to "understand and grasp the support needs of different types of aircraft under the conditions of different missions," it is practically impossible to train personnel to maintain all types of aircraft, and their current "joint combat support model" entails "mutually servicing aircraft of the same type and together servicing aircraft of different types," implying that it is not just PLAAF personnel who are involved ([PLA Daily](#), June 16).

At the end of 2022, units of the Eastern Theater Navy and Air Force practiced the first half of the aforementioned formula, "mutually servicing aircraft of the same type" ([National Defense and Military Affairs](#)

[at Noon](#), December 13, 2022). Four Su-30MKK fighters of the PLAAF's 85th Aviation Brigade landed at a PLA Navy airbase at which aircraft of the same type were stationed ([National Defense and Military Affairs at Noon](#), December 13, 2022). The navy field station then “overhauled and inspected,” refueled, rearmed, and launched the air force aircraft ([National Defense and Military Affairs at Noon](#), December 13, 2022). It is telling that this event was rare enough to qualify as newsworthy. Servicing a common type of aircraft is a low bar for jointness, but the specific example of joint combat support that was previously mentioned—an air force field station’s “combat sustainment” of an army helicopter—may not refer to anything more than refueling or rearming. This itself does not set the bar much higher. Therefore, one should be skeptical of the degree of jointness that the field stations of the aforementioned air defense base have achieved in just a few years of effort. However, the field stations would not be clearing these bars if they had not first undergone a transformation that prepared them for the task.

Increasing Field Stations' Flexibility

The degree of jointness that the field stations have achieved is a byproduct of a successful, years-long effort to enhance the flexibility of the PLAAF's field stations. At the beginning of the 2010s, field stations were loath to work outside their routines—and were sometimes incapable of doing so—and aviation units were reluctant to rely on other field stations ([China Military Television Online](#), May 15, 2017; [PLA Daily](#), May 15, 2017). Therefore, when pilots and aircraft were deployed for training away from their home airbase, the field station servicing their unit would also deploy personnel and equipment with them—by road and rail. The PLA negatively referred to this practice as “moving house” ([PLA Daily](#), December 19, 2015). The inefficiency of this practice “severely” impeded deployments ([PLA Daily](#), December 19, 2015; [PLA Daily](#), May 15, 2017). For example, it took elements of one field station nine days and nights to arrive at the airfield where an aviation unit was deploying for training ([PLA Daily](#), May 15, 2017). As the PLA put it, aviation units were “tied down by their families” ([China Military Television Online](#), May 15, 2017).

In 2011 the PLAAF had already established a work group to study how to cut its aviation units' logistical tails and implement a “zero accompaniment” (零伴随) combat support model ([PLA Daily](#), May 15, 2017). “Zero accompaniment” refers to aviation units deploying without elements of the field stations that usually service their aircraft. The PLA described it pithily as “moving in with just a handbag” ([PLA Daily](#), May 15, 2017). Of course, it requires that field stations throughout the PLAAF be able to work outside their routines and service aircraft that they usually do not.

A key factor in accomplishing “zero accompaniment” has been training field stations' personnel to have “one specialty and many capabilities” (一专多能) or to be “multi-capable” as the US Air Force puts it ([PLA Daily](#), December 19, 2015). The term is at least as old as the PLAAF's efforts to implement “zero accompaniment,” but it is not exclusive to the air force. “T-type warriors” (T型战士) is another more recent term for multi-capable personnel ([PLA Daily](#), November 15). The PLA has promoted “multi-capability” throughout the force not only to enhance units' flexibility, but also to increase the redundancy of certain capabilities in units, thereby improving their survivability. However, as old as the effort to promote “multi-capability” is, apparently

it was not until March 2023 that one field station of the Eastern Theater Air Force implemented its own cross-training program to develop “multi-capable” personnel ([PLA Daily](#), September 12).

The PLAAF has implemented “zero accompaniment” gradually. In 2012 the PLAAF experimented with “zero accompaniment” during its annual Red Sword exercise ([PLA Daily](#), May 15, 2017). By 2015 the PLAAF had implemented “zero accompaniment” at all its bases to which units deploy for major exercises, such as Dingxin Airbase ([Xinhua News Agency](#), November 10, 2019). “Zero accompaniment” now seems to be more widespread throughout the PLAAF. For example, in late July 2023 different aviation units deployed aircraft of various types, including an entire unit of Y-20s, to an unspecified airbase under the Central Theater Air Force ([National Defense and Military Affairs at Noon](#), July 18; [PLA Daily](#), August 8). The field station managed to sustain all the deployed aircraft’s operations throughout the day and into the night ([National Defense and Military Affairs at Noon](#), July 18; [PLA Daily](#), August 8). “Zero accompaniment” may have even affected how “accompanied” deployments are conducted. In September 2023, elements of a field station of the Southern Theater Air Force deployed without their own vehicles and equipment when conducting an “accompanied” deployment ([CCTV](#), September 12). Instead, the field station’s personnel used the local field station’s “zero accompaniment” vehicles and equipment, which likely eased the deployment ([CCTV](#), September 12).

Conclusion

Although it is significant that the PLAAF is working to attain a joint combat support capability, there is still little evidence to suggest that the PLAAF has made great progress in that effort. However, it has less distance to travel because of the strides it has made in changing its institutional culture surrounding combat support and in enhancing the flexibility of its combat support units. Besides building a foundation for joint combat support, the greater flexibility of the PLAAF’s field stations should also help them effectively service aircraft that are frequently redeploying across China, and to do so under austere conditions, a capacity that will become necessary if the PLAAF attempts to emulate the US Air Force’s Agile Combat Employment concept. Therefore, the gradual pace of the implementation of “zero accompaniment” should not detract from its significance. The fact that the PLAAF seems to have largely succeeded in implementing “zero accompaniment” should be taken as evidence that its subsequent efforts, whether to make its combat support units more agile or more capable of joint activity, will also likely succeed in time.

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CCP Ideological Indoctrination, Part 1: The PRC’s New “Patriotic Education Law”

by John Dotson



“Deeply Study and Implement the People’s Republic of China Patriotic Education Law”—a promotional graphic from PRC media touting the new law. (Source: [Datuwang](#))

Author’s note: This is the first article in a two-part series focused on recent initiatives taken by the Chinese Communist Party to implement ideological indoctrination programs intended to reinforce the Party’s ruling position, as well as the current official ideology of “Xi Jinping Thought.” This first article deals with a new law intended to promote “patriotic education” among the general public. The follow-up article will analyze a revised CCP plan revealed in autumn 2023 for the ideological training of Party officials.

On October 24, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee (全国人民代表大会常务委) officially codified the country’s existing initiatives for “patriotic education (PE; 爱国主义教育)” by promulgating the *People’s Republic of China Patriotic Education Law* (中华人民共和国爱国主义教育法). This mandates indoctrination in state-directed ideological content throughout all sectors of society ([PRC Government](#), October 25). While CCP policy documents are always more important than formal PRC law, the Party-state does use formal laws passed by the National People’s Congress (全国人民代表大会) to codify and emphasize Party policies. This law appears to be no exception. [1]

The unveiling of the new *Patriotic Education Law* has been accompanied by a campaign of predictably laudatory coverage in PRC state media. For example, the CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* ran a flowery editorial that quoted a professor from the China University of Political Science and Law as stating that “implementing the patriotic education law will enhance the daily practice of patriotic spirit” among the Chinese

people. The editorial itself opined that the NPC had, “on the basis of the rule of law, promoted and guaranteed New Era patriotic education, inspiring the nation's spirit, concentrating the people's strength, advancing the building of a strong country [and] national revival with extremely significant and profound meaning” ([People's Daily](#), November 23). Such coverage has appeared alongside other official messaging emphasizing the need for enhanced focus on ideological instruction. For example, the mid-October issue of the CCP's official journal *Qiushi* (求实) was a themed issue focused on ideology. It featured a lead article under Xi's name titled “Open New Frontiers for the Sinicization and Modernization of Marxism.” It also included a list of articles on supporting themes, such as a Central Party School article titled “In the New Era and New Journey, Unceasingly Advance the Party's Innovations in Theory” ([Qiushi](#), October 16).

It is to be expected that the CCP propaganda apparatus would hype legislation such as the *Patriotic Education Law* as a significant achievement—and calls for ideological rectification have been a regular feature of CCP discourse under Xi Jinping. However, there is reason to believe that the new law is significant as part of a broader effort by the CCP to reinforce longstanding efforts to propagate its preferred ideological narratives throughout Chinese society and to shore up public loyalty to the one-party state.

What Is “Patriotic Education” in the PRC?

While intensive ideological indoctrination is woven throughout CCP history, the Party's current framework of policies took shape in November 2019, when the CCP unveiled two lengthy framework documents on the subject of ideological “education.” The first of these was a detailed program from the CCP Central Committee that laid out a range of measures to increase the time and attention that CCP cadres would be required to spend on ideological study ([China Brief](#), December 31, 2019). [2] The second of the two 2019 initiatives was a document from the CCP Central Committee and the PRC State Council on measures directed towards the general public, titled *Implementation Guidelines for Patriotic Education in the New Era* (新时代爱国主义教育实施纲要) ([China Brief](#), December 10, 2019).

“Patriotic education” has a long history in the PRC. Such programs—also presented under the parallel rubric of promoting “socialist spiritual civilization (社会主义精神文明)” ([Dangjianwang](#), October 13)—were expanded in the 1990s in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis, as the CCP sought to harness patriotic narratives as a tool for rebuilding its own damaged legitimacy. [3] The focus of these efforts always incorporated material related to national concepts of patriotism (e.g., China's history, traditional culture, etc.) in tandem with an emphasis on political loyalty to the CCP—with the greatest emphasis falling on the latter. The 2019 plan emphasized this still further, mandating a significant increase in the resources and attention dedicated to ideological indoctrination in “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想).” The plan placed a particular focus on youth in schools, in order that young people might “inherit red genes (传承红色基因)” of loyalty to the Party. However, it also mandated efforts across society, to be implemented through regional CCP Party committees as well as the “people's groups and mass organizations (人民团体和群众组织)” controlled by the CCP United Front Work Department ([China Brief](#), December 10, 2019).



Students view an exhibition at the Jiangxi Province Archives (Nanchang City) about the revolutionary history of the CCP in the province (December 2020). Such “patriotic education bases” are identified in the PRC’s new Patriotic Education Law as institutions that should receive increased attention and support. (Source: [Sohu](#), December 11, 2020)

Provisions of the 2023 Patriotic Education Law

The October 2023 *Patriotic Education Law* does not change the direction of earlier ideological indoctrination policies, but it does further reinforce and strengthen them. A central message of the law is that while certain groups—such as students—may receive particular attention, measures for “patriotic education” are to be directed at the whole of Chinese society. Much of the text is vague and exhortational in nature, laying out broad guidelines to follow rather than specific requirements. That said, the text is valuable for highlighting and revealing the CCP’s policy priorities, as well as the extent of its totalitarian ambitions that PE measures be “merged into daily [life] (融入日常)” for all citizens (*Article 5*). [4]

Some of the major themes and provisions contained in the law are listed below.

Loyalty to the Party as the Most Essential Element of Patriotism

The clearest message contained in the law is that the fundamental element of “patriotism” consists of absolute loyalty to the ruling CCP. In an early section of the document that identifies the “fundamental content of patriotic education (爱国主义教育的主要内容),” the first three entries cover: the evolution of Communist ideology under the CCP; the history of the CCP and the history of “New China” under the CCP;

and “the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics [and] the major achievements of the Chinese Communist Party in leading the people in united struggle.” Only after this, in fourth position, comes “China's outstanding traditional culture”—linked together, of course, with China’s “revolutionary culture [and] socialist advanced culture” (*Article 6*).

Similarly, the text links patriotism inextricably with Communist ideology—and posits “Xi Jinping Thought” as the rightful evolution of the Party’s historical hierarchy of ideological formulations. The text states that:

Patriotic education must raise high the banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, persist in taking Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thinking of the “Three Represents,” [and] the Scientific Development Concept, with Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era as a guide; [and of] persisting in loving the country, loving the Party, and loving socialism integrated together...” (*Article 3*).

In addition to PE study materials, the law also emphasizes “red tourism (红色旅游)—that is, visits to sites associated with Party history or the Party’s accomplishments—as an important element of PE programs. The text states that “People's governments at county level and above should strengthen the safeguards, management, and uses for red resource [areas], unearth red resources with historical value [and] memorial significance, promote red tourism fused with developing model zones, bring into play the educational functions of red resources, and pass on the patriotic spirit” (*Article 25*).

Patriotic Education Must Be Emphasized In Schools...

As might be expected, children are to be a priority group for ideological indoctrination. The text states that PE must be “channeled into the compulsory education system (纳入国民教育体系),” and that it must “run through the entire course of school education (贯穿学校教育全过程).” (This echoes directives from the earlier 2019 *Guidelines* that PE content should not stand alone, but rather be merged into the full scope of school curricula.) Schools are also charged to emphasize PE in school activities outside of the classroom, to include organized visits to “patriotic education bases (爱国主义教育基)” such as museum exhibits and historical sites connected to CCP history (*Article 16*). Nor are such activities to end upon leaving campus: “The parents or other guardians of minors should merge passionate love of the country into household education” that follows the end of the school day (*Article 17*).

...But Implemented Throughout All Of Society

However, one should not make the mistake of thinking that PE is only to be directed at students. Rather, it is also to be directed at adults in the workforce. Using Maoist language evocative of earlier decades of the PRC, the law asserts that “enterprise work units should include patriotic education in the unit's education program, vigorously enhancing model worker spirit...” (*Article 19*). A primary role in organizing such efforts will be held by Party agencies—particularly the United Front Work Department—that oversee state-controlled labor and professional organizations. The law states:

Labor unions, the Communist Youth League, the Women's Federation, industry and commerce associations, literary and arts associations, writers' associations, science and technology associations, the China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, the Taiwan Compatriots Friendship Association, disabled persons associations, youth federations, and other mass organizations [should] develop patriotic education geared to their respective fields (Article 13).

As with students and young people, these PE efforts in state-controlled “mass organizations (群团组织)” should be incorporated into all facets of the groups’ activities:

Grassroots people's government organizations and grassroots autonomous mass organizations should merge patriotic education with activities for constructing socialist spiritual civilization (把爱国主义教育融入社会主义精神文明建设活动), reflect patriotic spirit in town conventions and village regulations, encourage and support the development of patriotism as the central theme of mass culture, sports, and other such activities (Article 20).

Measures for Implementation

Despite the range of measures laid out in the document, the text of the law is somewhat vague regarding the implementation of these programs, as well as which Party-state entities bear responsibility for particular functions. It states that “central department(s) for patriotic education (中央爱国主义教育主管部门)” will be responsible for national-level guidance and supervision (*Article 11*); and that regional offices of this department (地方爱国主义教育主管部门) will be responsible for “patriotic education work guidance, supervision, and comprehensive planning and coordination” at the local level (*Articles 12 and 24*). [5] The text also describes a role for state education departments, stating that “people's government education administration departments above the county level are to strengthen the organization, coordination, guidance, and supervision of patriotic education in schools (县级以上地方人民政府教育行政部门应当加强对学校爱国主义教育的组织、协调、指导和监督)” (*Article 12*).

Conclusions

On its face, the October 2023 *Patriotic Education Law* appears to offer little that is substantively new. Its provisions are largely consistent with the CCP's previous 2019 *Guidelines* for “patriotic education,” as well as the broader trend towards intensified ideological regimentation observable throughout Xi Jinping's tenure in power. However, the law does further emphasize the Party's focus on these initiatives. Many outside observers are too quick to dismiss the central role that ideology plays in the functions of the CCP Party-state, and therefore fail to understand the Party's policy-making orientation, and the institutional worldview of its leadership. The fact that the CCP saw fit to symbolically codify these “patriotic education” measures into law—and to promote them with a concurrent state media campaign—once again reinforces the high-level importance that the current CCP leadership places on society-wide ideological indoctrination as a key pillar of the Party's survival in power.

The forthcoming second article in this series will offer a detailed analysis of the CCP's October 2023 four-year plan for the ideological "education" of CCP cadres.

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Notes

[1] Prominent examples of this in recent years include the 2005 *Anti-Secession Law* (反分裂國家法) ([PRC State Council Taiwan Affairs Office](#), April 13, 2022); and the 2015 *National Security Law* (國家安全法) ([PRC Government](#), July 1, 2015).

[2] The successor document to this program, a revised October 2023 plan for cadre ideological training, will be discussed in the next article in this series.

[3] Suisheng Zhao, "A State-Led Nationalism: The Patriotic Education Campaign in Post-Tiananmen China," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (1998), 31 (3): pp. 287–302.

[4] All cited quotations in this section are from the text of the *People's Republic of China Patriotic Education Law* (中華人民共和國愛國主義教育法), as promulgated by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (October 25), https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202310/content_6911481.htm. All translations are by the author.

[5] It is ambiguous as to whether "central department[s] for patriotic education" refers to a singular bureaucratic entity, or whether it is employed as a more general term for the collective effort of multiple party bureaucracies (系統) with overlapping responsibilities for ideological indoctrination (CCP Propaganda Department, CCP Organization Department, *et al*). Per the 2019 *Guidelines* document, management of patriotic education programs was to operate under "the unified leadership of party committees, with party and state exercising joint management; propaganda departments will plan and coordinate; relevant departments will each be responsible for their work patterns, establishing patriotic education joint conference systems [for] work guidance and communication coordination." (See: John Dotson, "The CCP's Renewed Focus on Ideological Indoctrination, Part 1: The 2019 Guidelines for 'Patriotic Education'," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, Issue: 21 (December 10, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ccps-renewed-focus-on-ideological-indoctrination-part-1-the-2019-guidelines-for-patriotic-education/>.) It is possible that a more specialized, centralized bureaucracy for patriotic education programs may have superseded the arrangements described in 2019. However, this is speculative, and further research to clarify these points would be required.

Examining China's Grand Strategy For RISC-V

by Sunny Cheung

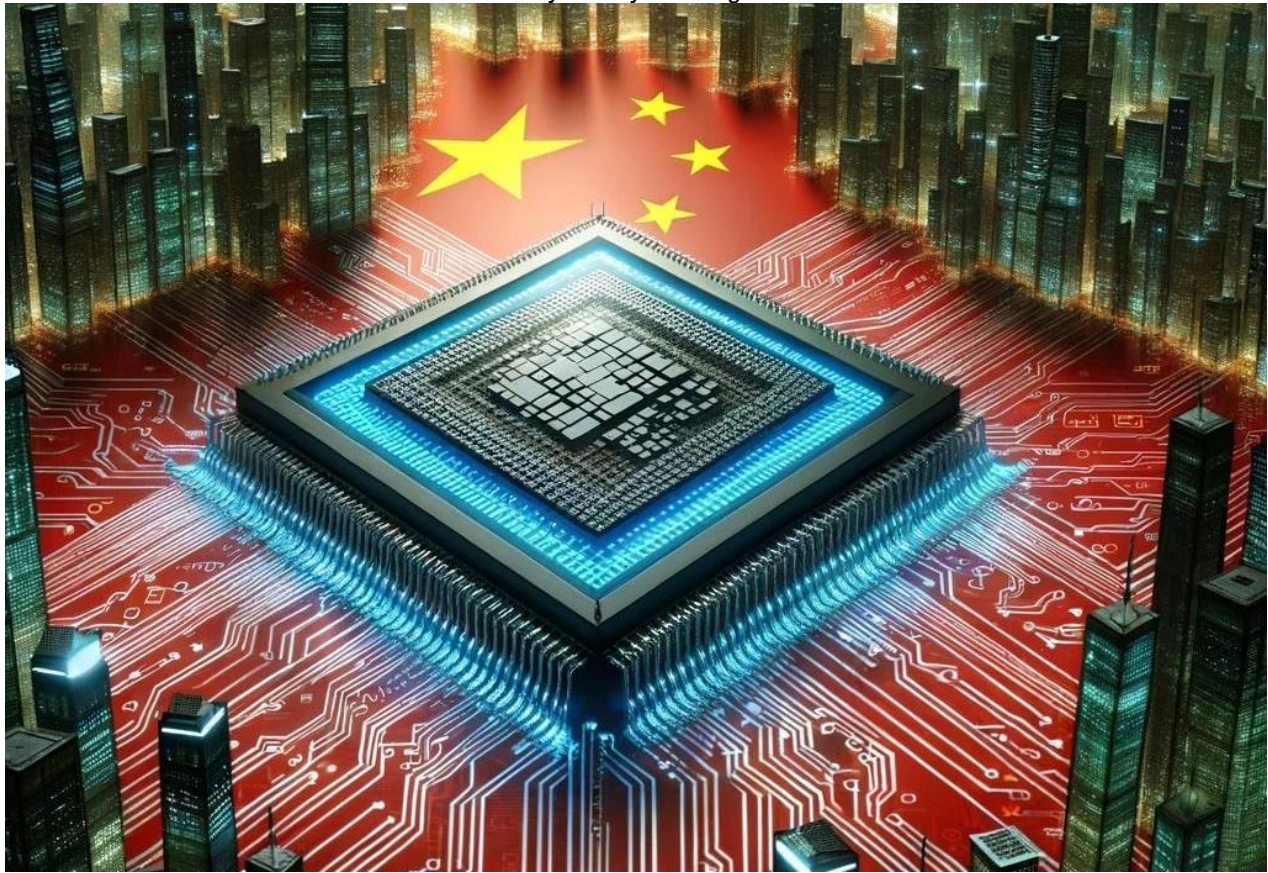


Illustration of China's chip ambitions. (Source: AI generated image)

On November 24, 2023, DAMO Academy (達摩院; literally “Dharma”), Alibaba's research division, unveiled three groundbreaking processors rooted in the open-source RISC-V architecture. The Xuantie (玄铁) C920, Xuantie C907, and Xuantie R910 processors promise to accelerate application of RISC-V technology into diverse sectors, from autonomous vehicles and artificial intelligence (AI) to enterprise hard drives and network communications ([Mydrivers News](#), November 24). These processors signify a strategic attempt by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to break out of the technological containment led by the United States through leveraging open-source hardware (OSHW). RISC-V products are proliferating around the world at a compound annual growth rate of 40 percent. Projections suggest that by 2030, RISC-V chips could attain a 25 percent market share in the system-on-chip (SoC) sector ([WSJ](#), December 14). RISC-V therefore has a pivotal role in shaping the future of the industry. The Chinese government's rapid, focused, and coordinated investment in RISC-V suggests that a closer examination of this understudied and emerging technology is warranted, especially in light of the limited policy coordination and discussions around RISC-V in other countries, particularly the United States.

The main insights of the piece are as follows:

- China believes that it has advantages that allow it to develop a lead in the development and commercialization of RISC-V technology. This is due to its strong research and development sector, particularly clustered in districts of major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, and the country's large talent pool of high-skilled workers.
- China's sees RISC-V as part of its wider ambition for technological autonomy and self-sufficiency. This is evidenced through the dominant role of PRC entities, including state-owned companies, in the upper tiers of the RISC-V Foundation, as well as through its numerous policy initiatives at the central and local levels to support China's push into RISC-V.
- China's concerns about dependency on American technology, which causes vulnerable "chokepoints," have also informed this push to dominate RISC-V. This has been a driver for RISC-V's development into becoming a competitor to the chip architecture of both ARM and Intel's x86 technology.
- The PRC's focus on RISC-V has received little attention from Western governments until recently, but this article suggests that assessments of potential risks to national security are now overdue.

What is RISC-V?

RISC-V stands for "Reduced Instruction Set Computing Five," and is a type of Instruction Set Architecture (ISA). ISAs function as an interface between software and hardware, determining how CPUs are controlled by software. One useful analogy frames the ISA as the pedals and user interface between the car (the hardware), and the driver (the software) ([Fabricated Knowledge](#), September 12). RISC contrasts with other ISAs such as CISC ("Complex Instruction Set Computing") by using a smaller, more efficient set of instructions, which can lead to faster processing speeds, lower power consumption, and easier adaptability to various applications. While the industry is dominated by proprietary ISAs, with Intel's x86 and ARM providing the leading ones, RISC-V is open source, constituting a long-term challenge to the incumbents—particularly to ARM. In recent years, momentum has been building from major tech giants and specialized firms eager to build products based on RISC-V, which constitutes the first market alternative for many years ([WSJ](#), December 14, 2024).

RISC-V was developed around 2010 as the brainchild of academics David Patterson, Krste Asanović, and their team at the University of California, Berkeley. It was conceived as an alternative to the complexities and proprietary confines of existing ISAs, and built upon foundational research conducted at Berkeley in the 1980s, which was funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and National Science Foundation (NSF) ([ETHW](#), February 2015).

The RISC-V Foundation was established in 2015 with founding members including the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) and US-based multinationals like Google and IBM. It was later joined by a host of Chinese firms, including Huawei and Alibaba. The Foundation—domiciled in Switzerland since 2019 to avoid

technology transfer restrictions from the United States—owns, maintains, and freely publishes RISC-V’s intellectual property ([Asia Times](#), December 2022). Its mission statement reads: “RISC-V combines a modular technical approach with an open, royalty-free ISA—meaning that anyone, anywhere can benefit from the IP contributed and produced by RISC-V ... RISC-V does not take a political position on behalf of any geography. We are proud to see organizations from around the world working together in this new era of processor innovation” ([RISC-V](#), last accessed December 2023).

Unrestricted access to this ISA has led to a surge in customized processors tailored for specific needs. Companies like Santa Clara-based SiFive, Alibaba, and Shanghai-based StarFive are already developing RISC-V chips for a wide range of applications, including SSD controllers, cloud systems, FPGA systems, and CPUs. Even giants such as Meta are incorporating RISC-V into their AI computing infrastructure ([Meta](#), May 18). But the extent of the technology’s use by Chinese firms, and its importance to China’s overall strategy is understudied.

China’s Perspectives On And Visions For RISC-V

R&D and Talent Advantages

RISC-V provides an opportunity for countries like the PRC to be present at the foundation of a whole host of technological innovations. Chinese experts have seen China's prowess in research and development, especially in open-source technology, as conducive to capitalizing on RISC-V from the beginning. Wu Yanjun (武延军), chief engineer at the CAS’s Institute of Software, has highlighted China's advantages: a vast market, a skilled workforce, and diverse application scenarios for RISC-V ([ChinaAET](#), September 9, 2022). Others have pointed out that China should promote open-source education within the university system to leverage its advantages for these emerging technologies and support the PRC’s strategic interests ([Wangxin Magazine](#), June 17).

China has one of the largest bases of tech graduates and seasoned R&D professionals in the world, and as of 2021 has 7.55 million developers active on GitHub, the world’s largest web-based repository source code, primarily used for version control and collaborative software development. It is projected that by the year of 2030, China will surpass the US, securing the top spot ([China Daily](#), August 2022). Quantity matters, and China is set to have an overwhelming edge in terms of skilled human resources. But the PRC’s ambitions also include setting standards, shaping trends, and saturating the open-source ecosystem with Chinese developers and products.

Technological Autonomy and Self-Sufficiency

China's “dual circulation (双循环)” policy, Xi Jinping’s economic schema for emphasizing domestic consumption and innovation while maintaining openness to international trade is a core part of the PRC’s drive for self-sufficiency and solving the country’s technological “strangleholds (卡脖子)” that put it at risk. RISC-V should be viewed in this context ([ChinaAET](#), July 26). There is increasing demand within the US

Congress to restrict RISC-V access to China ([Select Committee on the CCP](#), November 2). This move by Congressional members is framed in Chinese official media as revealing an underlying anxiety that China will soon enjoy technological autonomy. ([Global Times](#), October 24). As the *Global Times* states, RISC-V is potentially a game-changer for the PRC. It is poised to disrupt the long-standing duopoly of Intel and ARM, and is reducing the United States's ability to exercise control over parts of the semiconductor industry. Ni Guangnan (倪光南), the leading scientist of the Chinese Academy of Engineering focusing on RISC-V, also emphasizes that “developing open-source technology helps eliminate or alleviate risks such as containment, embargoes, service suspension, supply disruption, and decoupling” ([Wangxin Magazine](#), June 17). There is a clear strategic goal to increase the development of OSHW to lessen the impact of geopolitical tensions and supply chain vulnerabilities, and nurture an environment characterized by self-sufficiency ([PerfXLab](#), May).

China has thus built a formidable innovation ecosystem, developing a range of domestic processors through the concerted efforts of government, academia, and tech giants like Alibaba, Huawei, and Tencent. There are now over 300 companies in China developing products using RISC-V technology ([Slkor](#), March 17, 2022). In 2021, CAS brought the first generation of self-innovated RISC-V cores to market, the “XiangShan (香山)” processor ([Github](#), Accessed December 14). The capabilities of the second XiangShan processor, called “Nanhu (南湖)” released in August last year, allegedly surpasses those of ARM's Cortex-A76, making it the most powerful open-source core in the world ([RISC-V China](#), May 30).

Shaping The Global Tech Landscape

China under Xi has increasingly sought a larger role on the international stage. Such a desire to better shape the world to its preferences extends to what it sees as critical technologies—including RISC-V. The “14th Five-Year National Informatization Plan (‘十四五’国家信息化规划),” the Party’s current guiding document for digital issues, thus advocates “relevant Chinese institutions and enterprises to actively join international open-source organizations for major core technologies and participate in international standard cooperation and development.” ([CAC](#), December 2021).

The presence of Chinese entities in the RISC-V International Foundation, outnumbering those based in the United States in terms of high-level and strategic members, exemplifies this push. Out of 22 premier-level member units (高级会员单位), 12 are from China and 7 from the United States; and among the 179 strategic members (战略会员单位), 49 hail from China, compared to 41 from the United States ([RISC-V](#), last accessed December 14, 2023). It is unclear what the voting structures are within the foundation, but the PRC appears to have the ability to exercise significant influence through the Chinese state-owned or state-funded entities that manage the Foundation.

There are economic incentives to using RISC-V technology. China is capitalizing on these: In 2022, over 50 percent of the 10 billion RISC-V cores manufactured in the world came from China ([China Daily](#), August 25). Projections from the Foundation suggest that RISC-V chips will surpass 80 billion units by 2025, and will constitute 28 percent of the Internet of Things (IoT) market ([RISC-V](#), November 7, 2022). Consulting firm

Semico Research predicts that while RISC-V only accounted for \$80 million of the total \$2.2 billion IP market for CPU cores in 2020, it expects this to grow to \$687 million by 2027—a rise from 1 per cent to 16 per cent of global market share. While still far from ARM and x86, this increase is nevertheless significant, and can fairly be seen as a serious competitor ([Financial Times](#), November 22, 2022).

National And Local RISC-V Actions

China has been incrementally advancing its involvement with RISC-V technology since 2018. This is reflected in national policies and those of key cities—Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen all have policies to use RISC-V to boost innovations.

In November 2018, China established the China RISC-V Alliance (中国开放指令生态联盟) (CRVA) under CAS, chaired by Ni Guangnan, with the aim to rapidly advance the development of a domestic RISC-V ecosystem ([CRVA](#), last accessed December 2023). In March 2021, China released its “14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 (国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和 2035 年远景目标),” officially acknowledging the importance of open-source technology in the development of next-generation chips and AI. The plan aims to enhance China's strategic scientific and technological strength, with a focus on supporting the growth of digital technology open-source communities and improving the legal framework around open-source intellectual property ([Xinhua](#), March 13, 2021). In December 2021, the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (中央网络安全和信息化委员会) built on this with the “14th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization (“十四五”国家信息化规划).” This underlines the commitment to accelerate the development of domestic and international open-source communities and platforms, constructing a collaborative ecosystem for open-source innovations ([CAC](#), December 2021).

Beijing's Pioneering Role

In 2021, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Economy and Information Technology established the Beijing Institute of Open Source Chip (BOSC; 北京开源芯片研究院). With support from the Municipal Science and Technology Commission and the Administrative Committee in Zhongguancun (a major tech hub in the city), the institute has built a collaborative model linking industry and academia, which has been instrumental in developing and applying RISC-V technology ([BOSC](#), last accessed December 2023). The Institute's deputy director, Su Sen (苏森), believes Beijing can be a global leader in the RISC-V industrial ecosystem by 2030, by fulfilling plans to leverage its concentrated intellectual resources, active capital, and ([BeijingGov](#), August 30). Meanwhile, He Jianwu (何建吾), from the Zhongguancun Administrative Committee, echoed this, confirming that the district would become an industry hub for the development of RISC-V chips and continue providing a top-tier innovation environment for global partners ([BeijingGov](#), August 30). To this end, the city has provided office space, talent services, and public rental housing, and encouraged leading companies and manufacturers to offer a tailored environments for developing RISC-V.

Shanghai And Shenzhen: Innovation Catalysts

Shanghai was the first local government in China to announce a special fund for the development of software and integrated circuits (ICs), establishing the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Economy and Informatization (上海市经济和信息化委员会) in July 2018 to specifically target companies involved in RISC-V-related design and development ([The Paper](#), March 2). Two months later, the Shanghai-led China RISC-V Industry Consortium (CRVIC; 中国 RISC-V 产业联盟) was formed for firms and institutions to share resources and know-how ([CRIVC](#), last accessed December 2023).

This proactive stance has led to the clustering of over 1,300 enterprises, attracting nearly 40 percent of the nation's IC talent ([Shanghai Observer](#), March 5). One firm, VeriSilicon Technology (芯原) has invested 1.3 billion yuan in building a R&D Center to focus on advancing IoT platform research and promoting the RISC-V ecosystem ([Lin'gang Group](#), December 2021). Wu Xiaohua (吴晓华), Deputy Secretary of the CCP Working Committee of the Lin'gang (临港) New Area, recently highlighted its status as a hub for electronic design automation (EDA) enterprises and one of the earliest regions to focus on the RISC-V industry in China, hosting over a dozen RISC-V chip design and numerous RISC-V chip application enterprises. Wu signaled continued policy support in talent recruitment, intellectual property, and application ([The Paper](#), August 28).

The Shenzhen Municipal Government's engagement with RISC-V extends back to 2014, with the establishment of the Tsinghua-Berkeley Shenzhen Institute (清华-伯克利深圳学院) (TBSI) to integrate resources from academia, Chinese government, and industry ([TBSI](#), last accessed December 13, 2023). In November 2019, TBSI also opened the RISC-V International Open Source Laboratory (RIOS Lab) under the leadership of David Patterson, an American academic who played a pivotal role in the development of the technology. The lab engages in cutting-edge research in RISC-V hardware and software ([SIGS](#), last accessed December 13, 2023). TBSI has also launched a RISC-V Mentorship Program, pairing mentors and project leaders with mentees and interns for 12-week periods ([TBSI](#), last accessed December 13, 2023). The Shenzhen Municipal Development and Reform Commission (深圳市发展和改革委员会) has also recently introduced measures to spur high-quality development in the sector, articulating its aims for breakthroughs in CPUs and GPUs, and for developing specialized chips for AI and edge computing. This has come with substantial incentives: Companies investing over RMB 10 million in chip design are offered up to 20 percent of the R&D investment, capped at RMB 10 million annually; and Shenzhen-based companies achieving chip sales exceeding RMB 20 million can receive rewards up to 15 percent of their annual sales, also capped at RMB 10 million ([Shenzhen Gov](#), Oct 8, 2022).

These coordinated efforts by Shanghai and Shenzhen exemplify a commitment to RISC-V technology within China's national semiconductor strategy, aiming for global leadership and innovation in this vital technological field.

Conclusion

China's engagement with RISC-V is a testament to its strategic foresight and ambition to reshape the semiconductor industry, challenging long-established norms and power structures. The increasing influence of Chinese entities in the RISC-V International Foundation is a clear indicator of China's intention to steer the direction of RISC-V development. This shift in control away from the United States is not merely about technological advancement, but about altering the global tech order. China sees RISC-V as an opportunity to enhance its self-innovation capabilities, foster self-sufficiency, and navigate the complexities of increasing geopolitical tensions.

Dual-use applications of RISC-V technology must also be considered. Chinese experts from the PLA Information Engineering University recently claimed to demonstrate the application of RISC-V in significantly enhancing the efficiency of cryptographic algorithms that could be used in IoT devices. Their experiments achieved a remarkable 700 percent acceleration in the AES algorithm with only a 2 percent increase in hardware resources. [1]

RISC-V presents immense potential for innovation and technological advancement across the planet. But it also brings inherent vulnerabilities. As PRC entities become the predominant manufacturers of electronic hardware in an increasingly digitally-integrated world, the possibility of malign technology being embedded in critical systems at the hardware layer during fabrication, warrants our concern and requires robust countermeasures and resources to investigate and counter potential threats ([SCSP](#), February). China is investing significantly in this technology, but further analysis is needed to assess the PRC's capabilities in leveraging it in ways that impact the national security of other states. As we navigate this complex terrain, the challenge lies not only in assessing China's advancements but also in formulating responses to an open-source technology that defies traditional control mechanisms. The repercussions of any actions taken must be carefully weighed to ensure a balanced and effective approach to this new era of technological competition.

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Notes

[1] Zhang Xiaolei et al., Design and verification of AES cryptographic acceleration engine based on RISC-V. *Application of Electronic Technique*, 2023, 49(2):39–44.

Six Months of Germany's New China Strategy: Old Ways Die Hard

by Ed Bithell



Olaf Scholz and Xi Jinping. (Source: [Creaders.net](https://creaders.net))

On December 1, the first visa-free travelers entered China from a select group of mainly European countries: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and Malaysia ([Xinhua](https://www.xinhuanet.com), December 2). Expanding visa-free travel (for more than 72 hours) to these countries was arguably the most visible step of “opening up” from China since the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet it was a clear statement of opening only to favored partners. This will feel like vindication to Germany—the largest beneficiary country, and one which has been attempting to redefine its relationship with China since publishing a detailed new China strategy in July 2023. The strategy articulated Germany’s strongest concerns for the trajectory of Sino-German relations since reform and opening began in 1978. However, six months on, its impact has been limited by a wider lack of direction and unity in the German federal coalition.

China and Germany’s Long Trade Honeymoon

Sino-German relations experienced a long honeymoon period after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) embarked on its economic reform agenda in the late 1970s. The PRC cultivated new trading links to boost its growth, without committing to political liberalization, while Germany won a major export market, especially for its huge car industry. The key to making this a “win-win” partnership was the German neoliberal principle of “Wandel durch Handel” or “change through trade,” which held that commercial expansion would eventually lead to reform in China by empowering liberal business leaders to demand market (and eventually political) liberalization.

China is now Germany's single largest trading partner, but the trading relationship is more complex than this headline statistic implies ([Federal Bureau of Statistics](#), November 1). In particular, Chinese market limitations have led major German industrial players to invest heavily in local joint ventures, while smaller companies have struggled to establish a presence. Just four German companies—carmakers Volkswagen, BMW, and Daimler, and chemical giant BASF—made up 34 percent of all *European* FDI into China between 2018 and 2021 ([Rhodium Group](#), September 14, 2022). Meanwhile, the direct balance of payments has shifted over time, reaching an annual trade deficit of €86 billion (\$93 billion) in 2022 ([Federal Bureau of Statistics](#), November 1).

This trade deficit is worse in key industries. For instance, Germany imported \$3.6bn of rechargeable batteries from China in 2021, against \$842m in exports to China. Similarly, Germany imported \$1.69bn of photovoltaics from China, against just \$111m in exports to China. These numbers in key emerging industrial sectors are trivial when compared with German exports to China of \$31.4bn in automotive and automotive parts ([UN Comtrade via CEPIL](#), 2021). This makes for long-term conflict of interests in German business lobbying. Big industries with an established presence in China, especially automotive, have a strong stake to defend in trade relations, while emerging markets are losing out in the status quo. Indeed, German auto companies are invested to the extent of long dismissing their complicity in forced labor in Xinjiang—something that continues to this day, as the backlash to a recent audit of Volkswagen's joint venture in the region indicates ([Shanghai Daily](#), December 7; [Reuters](#), December 13).

The New Government's 2023 China Strategy

The current German coalition was formed in December 2021, by which time tensions over the disparity between trade flows, including a proposed new EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), and political repression typified by the 2020 Hong Kong crackdown, had developed into a broader crisis in EU-China relations. The government is led by the Social Democrats, with Olaf Scholz, a veteran of the centrist Merkel government that championed the CAI, as Chancellor. Their partners are the Free Democrats (free market liberals) and the Greens (more stridently challenging to China on human rights and security). The latter controls the Foreign Office under Annalena Baerbock.

Baerbock's Foreign Office has spearheaded negotiating a more assertive China policy across government, publishing a new comprehensive 64-page China Strategy in July 2023. This document begins by acknowledging that “we need to change our approach on China” ([Strategy on China of the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany](#), July 13). The framework mirrors that of the EU, designating China variously as “partner,” “competitor,” or “systemic rival” depending on the situation—an approach that offers flexibility and pragmatism where needed on global issues like climate change, but requires clear, detailed thinking in order to translate into coherent policy. This is perhaps inevitable given the highly open nature of the previous policy, and meets the strategic imperative to keep seeking cooperation on certain key issues. Nonetheless, it presents a challenge to Berlin (and Brussels), especially when stakeholders have divergent interests.

What unites the Strategy the most across these sometimes-disparate approaches is the EU itself. The most consistent tenet of the document is that “a successful approach to China requires Europe as a whole to bring its influence to bear.” Many of the most important parts of Germany’s strategic arsenal are articulated through EU policies. This is particularly visible in the trade policy dimensions of the Strategy, which focus heavily on trade defense tools managed by the European Commission, such as the Anti-Coercion Instrument and the Foreign Subsidies Regulation.

The Strategy’s drafting by committee has cost it clear direction at key points, however. For example, the document claims that “de-risking is urgently needed. However, we are not pursuing a decoupling of our economies.” It elaborates with further points, such as EU autonomy on critical technologies “from third countries that do not share our fundamental values.” But it remains reticent to acknowledge that at a certain level the difference between “de-risking” and “decoupling” is simply a question of where the pain of decoupling is a necessary trade-off against risks that are too important to ignore. Similarly, the Strategy argues that the Belt and Road Initiative aims to build a network of countries dependent on China, but simultaneously asserts that the German and European response ought not to require any “us-or-them decisions.”

Chinese observers have followed Germany’s positioning on these issues, with Cui Hongjian (崔洪建), the director of the Department for European Studies at Peking University’s China Institute for International Studies, characterizing the partner, competitor, rival paradigm as “fundamentally self-contradictory (自相矛盾)” in the Party-controlled news outlet the *Global Times* ([Global Times](#), June 15). Following the publication of the Strategy, Xinhua went further, pushing a pseudonymous op-ed which both lambasted the German government—and particularly the Greens—as covertly “anti-China” but also insisted that there is no fundamental conflict of interest and that Germany could return to a more mutually beneficial arrangement ([Xinhua](#), July 17). The piece also took aim at factional divisions within the government, praising Scholz for being “pragmatic and moderate” unlike the “radical” Greens. This shrill commentary complemented the MFA’s muted official response. At a press conference, spokesman Wang Wenbin (王文斌) emphasized that Germany and China still have more consensus and common interests than divisions, albeit with a criticism that that the de-risking approach is to “swim against the tide of history (逆时代潮流而动)” ([FMPRC](#), July 14).

Progress On the Strategy Disappoints

The events of the last six months suggest that Germany may be slower to change its approach to China in practice than the Strategy heralds. The most prominent case of this is the German response to the European Commission’s new probe into Chinese subsidies to the electric vehicle (EV) sector. Chinese subsidy abuse is noted in the new Strategy multiple times, alongside a consistent commitment to EU-level decision-making, especially on trade policy, which is led by the European Commission and not by individual countries. However, Germany has passively resisted taking any action on EV subsidies, partly due to its big auto players’ exposure to potential Chinese retaliation. The German car industry even lobbied against EU action

while the EU-wide industry lobbied for it ([EURACTIV](#), September 13). When the European Commission finally announced a formal investigation following sustained pressure from France, Scholz still held back from supporting the position, commenting to German business paper *Wirtschaftswoche* that he was “not really convinced” by the move, and even that “our economic model shouldn’t be based on or rely on protectionism” ([Wirtschaftswoche](#), September 28). This was immediately picked up by the *Global Times*, which leaned on similar responses from parts of German industry and media to present a narrative of bottom-up opposition to “counter-productive” measures from the European Commission ([Global Times](#), September 28).

Scholz’s prevarication somewhat undermines Brussels’ attempt to grip the challenge of separating “partner, competitor, and rival” in this crucial sector, while showing how the old status quo German approach is still limiting policy thinking. This is partly about working practices—Germany is not used to dealing with a partner that consistently does not play fair, as China has consistently done by subsidizing its industries to outcompete foreign firms until its indigenous champions are unassailable in the mature market. (This can be seen in the EV industry, but also batteries, photovoltaics, among others.) It is also about the material conflicts of interest between potential future industries and the big German companies with an established presence in China. The automotive players know they have everything to lose, exemplified by Mercedes-Benz CEO Ola Källenius that “for us, de-risking doesn’t mean reducing our presence in China but increasing it” ([Financial Times](#), April 30). Chinese state media have made much of these comments, even arguing that present trade tensions show that the EU should allow Chinese companies more access to invest in Europe to balance the trade ([China Daily](#) December 7).

5G provides another representative challenge. In September, the German federal government proposed to further limit telecom operators’ use of Huawei technology in new 5G infrastructure ([Reuters](#), September 20). This follows the Strategy’s aim of achieving “technological sovereignty.” It also follows accusations from elsewhere in Europe of sustained foot-dragging, where Germany—and Scholz in particular—has come to be perceived as someone who avoids making key decisions until they are unavoidable ([EURACTIV](#), June 16). Here Germany provides a stark contrast from countries such as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, all of whom have fully banned Huawei ([EURACTIV](#), November 27). The German government appears willing to hedge its bets and neglect a common European position, in case other parties push for a tougher position than it (and German industry) are willing to adopt. In neither case does the German approach seem to have changed much from the controversial decision Scholz took just before the China Strategy was published to allow Chinese shipping giant COSCO to invest in critical port infrastructure, against open opposition from (Green) economic minister Robert Habeck ([Politico](#), May 10).

Chinese commentary exhibits a calculated effort to sow division. Since the Strategy’s launch, it has maintained a consistently hostile position against Habeck and Baerbock, as well as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, while still praising Scholz as moderate and statesmanly ([Global Times](#), August 19). Likewise, the move to allow a small number of European countries visa-free access (and very visibly not the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or China-skeptic EU countries such as Czechia and Lithuania) appears to be a calculated part of Beijing’s wider attempts to bilateralize its interactions with European countries and bypass the more assertive European Commission. On the other hand, China

appears to be offering little deeper in terms of incentives, likely relying on entrenched attitudes and interests more than the promise of greater cooperation—an attitude vindicated by the German automotive lobby at the very least.

One error of some of this Chinese commentary is that it sometimes veers from praising German “moderation” into mistakenly thinking that the German government may be ready to support Chinese institutional initiatives. In November, the *People’s Daily* even published an “International Observer” column speculating that Germany might join the Belt and Road Initiative ([People’s Daily](#), November 4). Some of this response appears rooted in deeper misapprehensions about German strategic culture. Jian Junbo (简军波) from Fudan University’s Centre for European Studies argued on December 7 that Germany “to some extent supports multi-polarization (一定程度上支持多极化),” similarly to other recent commentary from leading EU scholars like Cui Hongjian describing Germany as a potential revisionist power ([Fudan Institute of International Studies](#), December 7; [Global Times](#), June 15). This is a fundamental and rather revealing misreading of Germany’s position on “polarity” under the realist analytical lens prevalent in Chinese international relations. While German strategic language may indicate an openness to “multipolarity,” this is about Germany (and, even more importantly, the EU as a bloc) being able to take a different approach to the United States on particular issues while still cooperating in status quo institutions. It is not about revising the fundamental international order, as “multi-polarization” means to the PRC.

Conclusion

The German government’s launching of its China Strategy this summer showed that even the most reactive and cautious leaders in Germany’s government, up to Chancellor Olaf Scholz himself, recognize that Germany needs to take a new approach on China. However, the Strategy itself can only suggest potential measures—it is down to the government itself to act. In the last six months, the government has not shown which measures it is actually prepared to take.

Germany’s coalition partners are showing neither the ideological cohesion nor the political agility to maintain a united position on core policy priorities at present. This presages more strategic drift on China, in terms of both foot-dragging on implementation of the Strategy’s stronger suggestions, and in supporting more robust and cohesive action at the European level. In these circumstances, internal solidarity among the government’s coalition partners and externally with the European Commission and other Member States, will be essential to maintaining a credible policy, and avoiding the mistakes that Merkel’s government made in ignoring partners’ security concerns.

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