



VOLUME 24 • ISSUE 2 • JANUARY 19, 2024

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‘Self-Revolution’ Suggests Stronger CCDI Mandate

by Arran Hope



Xi Jinping discusses “carrying out self-revolution to the end.” (Source: [CCTV](#))

Executive Summary

- Xi Jinping addressed the perennial dilemma of corruption within the CCP, pronouncing “victory” in a decade of anti-corruption efforts but simultaneously warning that the situation remains “grim and complex.”
- In the short term, anti-corruption crackdowns are expected to continue, with Xi targeting sectors with concentrated power, capital-intensive industries, and resource-rich areas. The military, particularly the Strategic Support Force, might face increased scrutiny.
- The third plenary session of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) of the twentieth party congress took place on January 8, emphasizing “courage in [performing] self-revolution” as a distinctive character and advantage of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The third plenary session of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) of the twentieth party congress took place on January 8. A report on the meeting in the People’s Daily begins by extolling “courage in [performing] self-revolution (勇于自我革命)” as “the most distinctive character and greatest advantage of our Party (我们党最鲜明的品格和最大优势)” ([People’s Daily](#), January 8). “Self-revolution (自我革命)” is an arresting piece of Chinese Marxist terminology identifying a spiritually puritanical self-discipline which must perpetually underpin the conduct of all cadres. Resuscitated from the Mao era, the phrase has

been in regular use by General Secretary Xi Jinping. But its frequency has increased dramatically in the last two years, perhaps due to deepening corruption scandals within the party. The genealogy of “self-revolution” in CCP discourse and the language with which it is often collocated is indicative of Xi’s current concerns for the organization that he leads, and gestures to those areas that are likely to be purged in the near future.

Self-Revolution To Solve Corruption

Xi Jinping’s speech at the annual CCDI plenum pithily distilled the perennial dilemma that corruption presents for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Xi started out by lauding a “decade of relentless and vigorous anti-corruption efforts (经过 ... 十年坚持不懈的强力反腐),” in which “an overwhelming victory (压倒性胜利)” has been achieved. However, this message is tempered within the same sentence with the warning that “the situation continues to remain grim and complex (但形势依然严峻复杂)” ([People’s Daily](#), January 8). This should come as no surprise, following corruption scandals last year that led to the removal of Minister of Defense Li Shangfu (李尚福) and Foreign Minister Qin Gang (秦刚), in addition to various senior military officials ([China Brief](#), November 10, 2023). The magnitude of the problem is underscored in even the official numbers reported by Li Xi (李希) at the plenary session. For the first nine months of 2023, CCDI filed cases against 54 central-level cadres, 2,480 department- or bureau-level cadres, and 20,000 county- and division-level cadres. The Party has taken action against total of 113,000 people since the 20th Party Congress in October 2022 ([People’s Daily](#), January 8). Ten years on from the arrest of Zhou Yongkang (周永康), which is seen as a high watermark of Xi’s antigraft campaign, matters do not seem to have improved, despite increased powers arrogated to the CCDI ([China Brief](#), February 4, 2015).

A proposed solution is the unveiling of a new addition to the pantheon of Xi’s ideological innovations, “Xi Jinping Thought on Self-Revolution” ([Xinhua](#), January 10). This “thought” was subsequently diligently studied at a dedicated session for a Party Group of the State Council, attended by Li Qiang (李强) and Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥), and discussed by Wang Huning at the Central Committee’s theory study group ([People’s Daily](#), January 11). The substance of the thought is contained in “grasping nine issues.” These include standard tasks—such as loyalty to the Party’s central leadership, leading the great social revolution, and rectifying discipline and combating corruption—interspersed with more obviously meaningful statements that engage more directly with the Party’s problems and its attempts to fix them ([People’s Daily](#), January 8).

“Solving the unique problems of a big Party as the main direction (以解决大党独有难题为主攻方向)” is one such issue. Xi alluded to this problem at last year’s CCDI plenum ([Aisixiang](#), January 4). An explanation comes from Zhao Jianying (赵剑英), president and editor of the China Social Science Press in an essay on the topic of self-revolution. He writes that while Western governing parties are disciplined by competition from other parties (what Zhao calls “external regulation (他律)”), the CCP must “focus on ‘self-discipline (自律),’ recognize its own shortcomings, supervise itself, and develop itself” ([Aisixiang](#), December 9, 2022). Such observations hint at the very real issues caused by the lack of external constraints on the CCP. Put simply, corruption is a pathology of the system; a feature and not a bug. Framed in this way, the problem becomes an existential one, and indeed the Party speak of it as such. Zhao’s essay argues that “self-revolution has

become an important category in the CCP's theory of party-building," and frets that "if our Party does not govern itself strictly and realize self-revolution, it will become corrupted and deteriorate, shake the foundation of its rule, and even move towards self-extinction." Xi has echoed this framing, citing "self-revolution" in July 2016 on a speech celebrating the Party's 95th anniversary and connecting it to the durability of the CCP.

The Party's Historical Denialism

Party history helps to articulate the centrality of "self-revolution" (and the eradication of corruption) to the functioning of the Party. A 2021 academic article, which refers to the concept as "an important magic weapon (重要法宝)" notes that in each historical era within the last century (which the author divided into revolution, construction, and reform), the CCP has "always attached great importance to self-revolution and placed it in a prominent position concerning the success or failure of the regime (中国共产党总能高度重视党的自我革命并将其置于关乎政权兴衰成败的突出位置)" ([Chongqing University Journal](#), 2021). Its origins date to 1945, when the writer and educator Huang Yanpei (黄炎培) had a conversation with Mao in a cave dwelling in Yan'an. During the discussion, which centered on dynastic changes and the cycles of history, he raised the famous "Huang Yanpei's question." Huang cites a verse from the *Zuo Zhuan* [1] and asks, can the CCP escape the cyclical nature to history? Mao provides the "two answers (两个答案)" to this question. As explained in an essay by a member of the editorial board of *Qiushi*, the Party's main theory journal, these two answers relate to two different perspectives—an internal one and an external one. The first answer is "supervision by the people;" the second is "self-revolution." Quoting Xi, the author writes that "as long as there are no problems with the Marxist ruling party, there can be no major problems in a socialist country" ([Aisixiang](#), June 22, 2023). It is clear that self-revolution has long been considered fundamental to the Party's ability to reinvent itself and endure.

"Breaking free from historical cycle of rise and fall as the strategic goal" is now a constituent part of Xi's new Thought. The idea that the party can escape historical processes to achieve a kind of perpetual and stable progress is one that, to external observers, may appear to have escaped reason too. Nevertheless, it is logically consistent with the paradigm of historical materialism within which the CCP functions. Problems could arise, however, when the party's creed, which characterizes "self-revolution" as essential for "purity (纯洁性)," veers too far towards privileging "red" over "expert" in lieu of more effective political reforms. From looking at CCP rhetoric, however, this does seem to be the current trend. "Self-revolution" has gained traction in recent years. A brief survey of media articles or essays that focus on the term suggests that it has received a lot more attention since late 2021. This could be in part due to an article by former CCDI head Zhao Leji (赵乐际) on "Leading a Great Social Revolution with a Great Self-revolution," which argued that "Resolutely punishing corruption is a clear manifestation of self-revolution" ([Renminwang](#), November 18, 2021). But stronger emphasis on this topic from the Party's discipline organ indicates that corruption is no less widespread than a decade ago, and may be getting worse.

Looking Ahead

In the short-term, anti-corruption crackdowns will continue across a range of sectors. Xi's speech specifically targeted those with concentrated power, those that are capital-intensive, and those that are resource-rich, such as "finance, state-owned enterprises, energy, medicine and infrastructure projects" ([People's Daily](#), January 8). Xi did not touch on the military in his remarks, but given recent scandals within the PLA, ongoing investigations there could increase in scope. One potential target could be the Strategic Support Force. The PLASSF, established in 2015 as part of Xi's overhaul of the military, is responsible for space warfare, among other things. This is a domain which has grown in importance under Xi and is the kind of technologically advanced sector that Xi has prioritized ([China Brief](#), November 22, 2023). PLASSF also coordinates with the Rocket Force (PLARF), which has been plagued by corruption in recent times.

Looking further ahead, any success of "self-revolution" does not appear likely to benefit China's drive for national rejuvenation. It also remains to be seen whether it can provide an answer to the Huang Yuanpei question. If so, it could lead to a CCP-style 'end of history.' More likely by far, however, would be an end to the history of the CCP. For now, the more important question concerns understanding how the CCDI will incorporate this new ideological construction into its work, and how its new regulations will manifest across the Party and throughout the party-state.

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Notes

[1] “其兴也勃焉其亡也忽焉,” which roughly translates to “The rise [of those who take responsibility] will be prosperous, while the fall [of those who blame others] will be swift. The quote contrasts the founding rulers of dynasties with those who oversaw their dynasties' collapse. ([Zuo Zhuan, 11th Year of Duke Zhuang, 2.2](#)).

Admiral Hu Zhongming: The Chinese Navy's "Multi-Faceted" New Leader

by Ryan Martinson



Hu Zhongming (胡中明) (in white) accompanying Xi Jinping on a tour of a Jin-class submarine in April 2013. (Source: [Youtube](#))

Executive Summary

- Admiral Hu's expertise in undersea warfare is considered crucial as the PLAN prepares for potential conflicts in East Asia, particularly against the threat posed by the superior US submarine fleet.
- Hu is recognized as one of the finest submarine officers of his generation, having commanded both diesel-electric and nuclear-powered submarines, and participated in the PLAN's first circumnavigation of the globe.
- He has played key roles in designing policies for the submarine force and has demonstrated a commitment to undersea warfare, attending events related to submarine capabilities and tactics.
- Hu Zhongming has familiarity with other service arms, including the PLAN Marine Corps, and has observed their training exercises, contributing to his understanding of joint operations. He also led the Northern Theater Command Navy, which provided him with experience in leading a broad spectrum of naval capabilities.

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The Chinese Navy has a new Commander, and his name is Hu Zhongming (胡中明) ([81.cn](#), December 25, 2023). Though Admiral Hu is little known outside Chinese military circles, his appointment has major implications for China’s rise as a naval power—and all those it impacts. As service chief, Hu’s primary responsibility is to man, train, and equip the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), building it into a force that can effectively conduct the growing catalog of missions to which it is assigned. Admiral Hu himself will not make decisions about how Chinese naval power is ultimately used in war or peace, as that responsibility now largely falls to the PLA’s joint Theater Commands. But his leadership will directly affect whether or not operational forces can develop the *capabilities* needed to realize Beijing’s maritime ambitions in East Asia and beyond.

There are compelling reasons to examine Hu’s background and consider how it might inform his command of the PLAN. Open-source Chinese language materials provide insights into pivotal events in Hu’s career. Analysis of these provide an indication of how his skills and experience might be applied to the PLAN’s most pressing concerns. Hu is perhaps uniquely qualified for the post and is certain to play a very constructive role helping the PLAN progress through the next phase of its development. But his job will not be easy.

Year(s)	Position(s) Held
2004-2013	Captain of a Jin-class submarine assigned to the 2 nd Submarine Base; by 2011, promoted to Chief of Staff of the 2 nd Submarine Base
2013-2014	Commander of the 2 nd Submarine Base; promoted to Rear Admiral
2014-2016	Assistant to the PLAN Chief of Staff
2016-2019	PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff
2019-2022	Commander of the Northern Theater Command Navy; promoted to Vice Admiral
2022-2023	PLAN Chief of Staff
2023-present	PLAN Commander; promoted to full Admiral

Hu Zhongming’s Career (2004-present)

A “Multi-Faceted” Submarine Officer

Hu Zhongming, born in January 1964, in Qingdao, is among the finest submarine officers of his generation. By his early 30s, he had risen to command his own diesel-electric boat in the PLAN's North Sea Fleet. His submarine career took a twist in 2000, when he was selected for training to become the commanding officer of a surface ship, the Type 052 destroyer *Harbin* (112). This unusual transfer to another warfare community was the result of a fleet initiative to give outstanding young officers like Hu the opportunity to escape the narrow path of a typical PLAN officer career and become more “multi-faceted (复合型)” leaders. [1] Hu's brief stint as a surface warfare officer included participation in the PLAN's first circumnavigation of the globe (2002)

Hu returned to the submarine force, where he continued to outshine his peers. In February 2004, he was selected to serve as the commander of the first boat of the new Jin-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), then still under construction ([China Youth Daily](#), December 6, 2008). Hu excelled in his new assignment, winning numerous awards and accolades. In September 2006, for example, the PLAN formally recognized him as an “outstanding grassroots officer.” In 2008, while still serving as the captain of the Jin-class SSBN, then-Senior Captain Hu was chosen as a “model” member of the PLA. [2] In April 2009, on the 60th anniversary of the PLAN's founding, the *PLA Daily* profiled Hu as one of four “new generation” navy captains—the only submariner to be thus honored. [3]

During sea-trials for his Jin-class SSBN, Hu dealt with a near-catastrophic equipment failure. While operating in just 100 meters of water, the boat's dive planes got stuck at a 15-degree angle, with the vessel rapidly descending. According to PLA accounts, Hu “responded decisively,” ordering that the main ballast tank be blown. This arrested the boat's descent just in time to avoid calamity, though its bottom did reportedly scrape the sea floor. Hu's brush with death perfectly captured the PLAN submarine force mantra: “if you are afraid of dying, don't become a submariner.” [4]

In early 2013, Hu was promoted to the Commander of his unit, the 2nd Submarine Base (Sanya, Hainan). Within weeks of assuming the post, he hosted General Secretary Xi Jinping during his visit to the Base. On April 9, 2013, Xi toured a Jin-class ballistic missile submarine commanded by Hu's subordinate, Wei Bing (韦兵). As the base commander, Hu likely provided narration for the visit and answered Xi's questions about the boat. [5] Contemporaneous television news coverage showed him accompanying Xi as he boarded the submarine ([CCTV13](#), April 11, 2013). However, it is unclear what impact—if any—this early contact had on Hu's subsequent career trajectory.

Expertise In Undersea Warfare

As PLAN Commander, Admiral Hu must prepare the service for great power conflict in East Asia, which is Beijing's priority theater. Ultimately, that means being able to defeat a regional opponent—Japan, the Philippines, or Taiwan—presumed to be operating in concert with the US military. This presents a huge challenge. The PLAN still has no ready and reliable answer to the US submarine fleet, which is the best in

the world and arguably the greatest threat to any major Chinese maritime military campaign ([CIMSEC](#), March 21, 2022; [CIMSEC](#), May 18, 2023).

Admiral Hu's background as a submarine officer makes him especially well-qualified to lead service efforts to confront the US undersea challenge. After over a decade commanding both nuclear and conventional boats, he almost certainly has had first-hand experience operating against US and Japanese submarines. Moreover, since leaving front-line duty, Hu has played key roles designing policies to guide the development of the submarine force. As an Assistant to the Chief of Staff at the PLAN Headquarters, he participated in events such as a symposium on how PLAN educational institutions might best meet the training needs of Chinese submariners (Qingdao, October 2015) and a workshop on improving the employment, operational methods, and training of the PLAN submarine force (Ningbo, December 2015). [6] Later, as PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff, he participated in events like the PLAN submarine force's 2018 annual work meeting (Qingdao, January). Among other agenda topics, this meeting discussed ways to leverage the force's unique ability to "turn the tables against more powerful enemies (以弱胜强)." [7] As the PLAN Chief of Staff, then-Vice Admiral Hu further demonstrated his interest in and commitment to undersea warfare by attending the second annual undersea warfare wargaming competition, "Underwater Vanguard (水下尖兵)," held in Qingdao in November 2022. [8]

Familiarity With Other Service Arms

In late 2014, then-Rear Admiral Hu Zhongming was newly minted as Assistant to the PLAN Chief of Staff. In this new role, he began the process of learning about other PLAN warfare communities, or "service arms (兵种)"—a prerequisite for future senior command. The service arm most foreign to his own experience was likely the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC), then in the process of diversifying its mission set. Hu was given a front row seat as the service implemented its new doctrine of "all-domain operations (全域作战能力)." In January 2015, for example, he traveled to north China's Jilin province to witness the PLANMC's early foray into cold-weather training. [9] In September 2015, he journeyed south to Yunnan province to observe "Jungle-2015," a major live-fire exercise held to bolster the PLANMC's ability to operate in mountainous jungle terrain. [10] In January 2016, Hu went west to Xinjiang to watch the PLANMC conduct a live-fire exercise in the Gobi Desert. [11]

By early 2016, Hu had been promoted to PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff. The post gave him more room to exercise his ability to lead diverse forces. He was selected to serve as the PLAN exercise director for "Joint Sea-2017," a major Sino-Russian naval exercise held each year since 2012. The 2017 iteration involved two major phases: the first held in the Baltic Sea (July), the second in the Sea of Japan (September). China assigned three ships to participate in phase one (the destroyer *Hefei*, the frigate *Yuncheng*, and the replenishment ship *Luomahu*). Vessels assigned for phase two included the destroyer *Shijiazhuang*, frigate *Daqing*, replenishment ship *Dongpinghu*, and the submarine rescue ship *Changdao* ([Xinhua](#), July 27, 2017; [Xinhua](#), September 25, 2017). Joint Sea-2017 was an enormously complex undertaking involving both planning discussions ashore and at-sea exercises encompassing subjects such as air-defense, search and

rescue, anti-submarine warfare, and submarine rescue. Nevertheless, it appears to have been a major win for Sino-Russian naval cooperation—and a direct reflection on Hu’s leadership skills. [12]

By 2019, Hu was chosen to become the Commander of the Northern Theater Command Navy, based in Qingdao. This made him ultimately responsible for the readiness of dozens of units, notably including two destroyer flotillas, two frigate flotillas, the 1st Submarine Base, two conventional submarine flotillas, and multiple aviation units. Hu’s two years in Qingdao marked the culmination of his five-year preparation to command the full breadth of PLAN forces.

Experience In Training And Education

During his tenure, Admiral Hu’s most vexatious challenges will likely involve personnel. He will be haunted by a set of seemingly-insuperable problems: How can the PLAN effectively train—and keep—personnel when the navy is growing and developing at a near-wartime pace? How can it ensure that new sailors, most of whom probably come from poor educational backgrounds, can quickly develop skills needed to competently operate the hi-tech equipment the service is procuring? How does the navy instill sailors with a sense of urgency when four decades of peace make conflict seem remote? How does the PLAN transform inept operational commanders—a significant problem in the Chinese military—into officers capable of leading forces in modern naval conflict ([PLA Daily](#), June 22, 2023)? These challenges are not new, but if the service is to achieve the state of readiness Xi Jinping desires with the speed he demands, real progress must be made on Hu Zhongming’s watch ([Xinhua](#), April 12, 2018).

Admiral Hu’s career has prepared him to confront these perennial challenges. Fundamentally, his qualifications stem from his own successes organizing training activities while serving in the submarine service. After he achieved flag rank, however, he began participating in events to broaden his knowledge of how the rest of the PLAN trains and educates its officers and enlisted, such as the annual conclave of senior leaders from PLAN educational institutions (Bengbu, December 2016). [13] He also attended major gatherings to discuss reforms to the PLAN’s system of professional military education, ensuring he is well-briefed on the service’s training and education weaknesses—and the history of policies to remedy them. [14] As assistant to the Chief of Staff, then-Rear Admiral Hu participated in initiatives to improve the “realism” of basic training for enlisted sailors. [15] He even published his own ruminations on the topic, specifically on the need to inculcate the “combat spirit” in every new recruit. [16] Later, as Deputy Chief of Staff, he led efforts to strengthen vocational education across the PLAN. [17] Perhaps most important, he has participated in numerous force-on-force exercises (对抗演习) in the key areas in which the PLAN expects to fight in future conflict, giving him a deep familiarity with the operational strengths and weaknesses of the service he now leads. [18]

Conclusion

With Admiral Hu Zhongming at the helm, the PLAN has a new leader who both understands the big obstacles impeding its development and *appears* to possess the right qualities needed to surmount them. His

naval career shows a great breadth of experience, with each new chapter preparing him for higher leadership. He truly has become the “multi-faceted” officer his early mentors hoped he would.

Admiral Hu’s background makes him eminently qualified to serve as the PLAN Commander. His outstanding performance as a submarine officer, culminating in command of the 2nd Submarine Base, distinguishes him as highly intelligent, conscientious, and dedicated. After being posted to Beijing in 2014, he gained familiarity with the missions and capabilities of the other service arms that would eventually fall under his administrative command. As Commander of the Northern Theater Command Navy, he demonstrated the ability to manage diverse operational forces, laying the foundation for his subsequent return to Beijing. He holds deep expertise on undersea warfare—currently the main warfighting concern for the Chinese Navy—and is well-briefed on all the training and education challenges currently facing the service. In sum, it is difficult to imagine a more suitable officer to lead the PLAN through the next phase of its development.

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Notes

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[2] 建功军营精武沙场——第九届全军学习成才标兵风采录 [“Building Elite Military Camps—A Record of the 9th Iteration of the PLA-Wide Model Soldiers”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], September 22, 2008, p. 6.

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[7] 海军召开年度潜艇工作会议 ["Navy Holds Annual Submarine Work Meeting"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], January 22, 2018, p. 1.

[8] 海军第二届“水下尖兵”兵棋推演竞赛性考核开赛 ["Navy's Second Iteration of 'Underwater Vanguard' War Gaming Competition-Style Evaluation Begins"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], November 29, 2022, p. 1.

[9] 郭新华 [Guo Xinhua], 王元元 [Wang Yuanyuan], and 曾行贱 [Ceng Xingjian], 突出实战化全程化练兵提升全域作战能力 ["Highlighting Realistic and Complete Training to Improve All-Domain Operational Capability"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], January 26, 2015, p. 1.

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A Greater Bay Area: China's Initiative To Build A New Silicon Valley

by Sunny Cheung



A map of the Greater Bay Area with its constituent cities. (Source: Bayarea.gov.hk)

Executive Summary

- The GBA, covering 56,000 square kilometers with 70 million people, aims to become a globally renowned economic and technological hub, comparable to bay areas like San Francisco, Tokyo, and New York. Its economic output surpasses 13 trillion RMB (\$1.8 trillion) by 2022, exceeding developed countries like South Korea.
- The GBA leverages Hong Kong's international aspects for China's development, by attracting talent and resources through policies to liberalize the movement of money and people into the region.
- Special zones within the GBA incubate companies and research institutes focusing on hard sciences, technological innovation, AI, biomedical technology, and aerospace.
- The initiative, led by Xi Jinping, supports Beijing's military-civilian fusion development strategy, emphasizing the development of the People's Liberation Army through academic and other collaboration.

An Innovation Center was recently inaugurated with great fanfare in the Bay Area Core Valley ([CTEE](#), December 7, 2023). Located within the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone, the launch of a semiconductor testing and packaging innovation center owned by STMicroelectronics (ST) represents a strategic maneuver as part of China's ambitious Greater Bay Area (GBA) initiative. ST—a Swiss company and one of Europe's largest semiconductor companies—publicly investing in Shenzhen seems to defy the current US technology-denial strategy against China ([ST](#), accessed January 17). But it is indicative of China's use of the GBA initiative to realize its national strategy to establish itself as a leader in global innovation and technology while navigating US technological containment.

The GBA initiative, which became national policy under President Xi Jinping, encompasses a significant portion of Southern China, including major cities such as Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Macau. [1] It aims to transform the region into a globally renowned hub for economic activity and technological innovation, leveraging Hong Kong's international status to attract talent and investment.

The Greater Bay Area Initiative And Hong Kong's Importance

In 2019, Beijing unveiled its grand vision for the GBA. The “Outline of the Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (粤港澳大湾区发展规划纲要)” shows the government's ambitions for the region spanning Hong Kong, Macau, and nine cities in Guangdong province ([State Council](#), February 18, 2019). This initiative, spearheaded by President Xi Jinping, was intended to build on the economic strength of the Pearl River Delta megaregion through both further integration and expansion to include Hong Kong and Macau. With an area of about 56,000 square kilometers and a population of approximately 70 million, the GBA constitutes one of the most open and economically vibrant regions in China, playing a crucial role in the nation's overall development strategy. Its name is an explicit indication of its ambitions to be seen alongside three other globally renowned bay areas: the San Francisco-Bay Area, Tokyo Bay Area, and the New York-Manhattan Bay Area ([Xinhua](#), March 22, 2023).

Economic and urban policies conceived at the national level shape China's urban system. [2] This can be seen in the rise of individual cities that receive the imprimatur of China's top leader, such as Deng Xiaoping's approving China's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Shenzhen in 1992, or Xi Jinping's preoccupations with Xiong'an New Area ([CPC](#), last accessed January, 17; [HK01](#), January 17, 2022; [China Brief](#), August 18, 2023). This centralized, top-down approach extends to megaregions—vast agglomerations of multiple economically vibrant city clusters. These are detailed under the “Coordinated Regional Development Strategy (区域协调发展战略),” a national-level strategy targeted to address regional disparities and promote balanced development across China's uneven landscape ([State Council](#), December 26, 2023). Beyond the GBA, other megaregions include the “Jing-Jin-Ji” region, which integrates Beijing, Tianjin, and parts of Hebei Province; the Yangtze River Delta, which is centered on Shanghai and the surrounding cities of Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Suzhou; and the Chengdu-Chongqing Economic Circle in western China.

Megaregions such as the GBA are powerful drivers of China's economic growth. By 2022, the GBA's economic output exceeded 13 trillion renminbi (RMB; \$1.8 trillion), above that of developed countries like

South Korea. ([CE](#), October 27, 2023). The region serves as a testbed for integrating economic growth with technological development, exemplified by collaborative efforts between universities, research institutes, and industry in areas such as quantum science, the digital economy, and biomedical research. Uniquely positioned at the forefront of China's coastal opening-up, its robust transportation infrastructure includes world-leading ports and international aviation hubs. In 2023, the nine mainland cities within the GBA accounted for 19 percent of China's total import and export value, reaching 7.95 trillion RMB; (\$1.11 trillion) ([Sina](#), January 17).

The GBA initiative differs from other megaregions within the People's Republic of China (PRC) in one key respect. It goes beyond the Pearl River Delta, which it subsumes, by integrating the autonomous regions of Hong Kong and Macau. In this way, it seeks to leverage the international aspects of these territories for the benefit of the PRC's development. The PRC has benefited from Hong Kong's unusual status for decades, which allowed it to function as a "hidden-in-plain-sight source of rule of law and market finance" for PRC-based entrepreneurs, as political scientist Yasheng Huang has argued. [3] The PRC's unilateral destruction of Hong Kong's special status in 2019 has allowed Beijing to advance its plan for deeper regional integration on the GBA. It seems likely that the deterioration of Hong Kong's institutions will reduce its ability to play the role that Beijing wants it to, but folding it into the wider region has had other benefits from the CCP's perspective. It has all but destroyed Hong Kong democracy in favor of Chinese-style modernization, with lessons for other territories. From this perspective, the PRC's persistent designs on the Taiwanese islands of Kinmen and Matsu for deeper economic and infrastructural integration can be seen as a necessary step on the road to national reunification and rejuvenation ([China Brief](#), January 5).

The GBA initiative is intended in part to advance Beijing's military-civilian fusion (MCF) development strategy. The 2019 plan states that the GBA must bolster the development of the People's Liberation Army, with Chapter Four, "Building an international science and technology innovation center (建设国际科技创新中心)," urging promotion of "the innovative development of civil-military integration in the nine cities in the PRD, and supporting the creation of civil-military integration innovation demonstration zones (推动珠三角九市军民融合创新发展, 支持创建军民融合创新示范区)" ([State Council](#), February 18, 2019). There is also a strong emphasis on academic collaboration. Utilizing the global resources and accessibility of Hong Kong universities, as seen in the numerous collaborations between Hong Kong academia and Shenzhen and Guangzhou government, the GBA initiative could facilitate significant transfers of knowledge and recruitment of talent.

Special Zones Promote Priority Sectors

The core focus of the GBI initiative is in bolstering the hard sciences and technological innovation. These are incubated in a number of special zones, including the *Hetao Shenzhen-Hong Kong Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone* and the Qingsheng District of Nansha, Guangzhou.

Hetao Shenzhen-Hong Kong Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone

The Hetao Shenzhen-Hong Kong Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone (河套深港科技创新合作区; hereafter, the Zone), is a core part of the GBA initiative. A plan for the Zone's development up to 2035 was laid out in 2017, detailing 11 separate specialized industrial parks. ([GovHK](#), January 3, 2023). Huang Min (黄敏), Vice Mayor of Shenzhen City, recently emphasized the Zone's role as the GBA's sole major cooperation platform for scientific and technological innovation was ([SouthCN](#), September 13, 2023).

An updated agenda was produced by the State Council in August 2023 ([State Council](#), August 8, 2023). It outlines a comprehensive strategy to push the boundaries of next-generation information technology, focusing in particular on integrated circuit design, software development, testing and packaging, and 5G technologies. The aim is to foster technological breakthroughs and set standards for these technologies. In line with the "14th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization ('十四五'国家信息化规划)" ([CAC](#), December 28, 2021), the Zone's design is that of a smart city, containing a pervasive digital infrastructure system, a collaborative and efficient digital government service system. This is intended to nurture leading-edge industries and encourage the growth of a digital economy, while enhancing the urban experience for citizens.

Advanced biomedical technology is another core focus of the Zone. The plan mentions a push to accelerate innovations in medical imaging, precision medicine, cell therapy, and new biomaterials. Collaborations in drug and vaccine development, genetic testing and diagnostics, high-end medical equipment, and artificial intelligence (AI) applications for biotechnology are also included. As such, it is poised to become a platform for global top-tier medical R&D and manufacturing outsourcing services by 2035.

The Zone has attracted numerous businesses related to AI and the digital economy. These work on constructing AI innovation platforms, developing intelligent sensors, designing graphics processors, and creating demonstration bases for intelligent manufacturing and autonomous driving. Setting AI standards and exploring the regulated application of big data, cloud computing, and blockchain in financial services is an additional priority. STMicroelectronics' semiconductor center, established in the Zone, demonstrates at least some successes in enticing international players in the technology sector to the region, despite the adverse political climate.

Hong Kong is highlighted as central to internationalizing the science and technology innovation system in the Zone. The city's concentration of talent and knowhow is being leveraged through relaxing visa processes to enable more liberal entry, stay, and residency policies in collaboration with the Hong Kong government. The plan also explores innovative cross-border financial management for scientific research by supporting joint venture capital funds between the mainland and Hong Kong and fostering cross-border scientific project funding. By enhancing cross-border linkages, professionals and innovators working in Hong Kong can more easily collaborate or transition to projects within the Shenzhen-Hong Kong innovation hub. In this way, access to the entire GBA region is an appealing prospect to prospective investors and experts. Five renowned Hong Kong universities have set up ten innovative R&D platforms in the Shenzhen Park within the

Zone, alongside over 150 other advanced research initiatives ([LOCPG](#), September 13, 2023). One such example is a joint laboratory focusing on quantum science, established by Guangzhou Laboratory and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The lab is supported by an RMB 200m (\$28m) annual investment from the Guangdong provincial government. Half of the first batch of projects have been led by Hong Kong universities ([LOCPG](#), September 13, 2023).

Guangzhou Nansha and Qingsheng District

Guangzhou Nansha (广州南沙)—and specifically its Qingsheng District (庆盛)—is emerging as another area for innovation cooperation. The Greater Bay Area Development Plan designated Nansha as a “comprehensive cooperation demonstration area” with Hong Kong and Macau, focusing on innovation and development. It is newer and therefore less advanced than Hetao or other developed innovation hubs in the country, but it has a prominent role in assisting the Hetao plan. This role has recently been enhanced following a decision by the Guangzhou Municipal Government to solidify Nansha's strategic platforms ([GuangzhouGov](#), January 11). Nansha has thus become home to a number of high-end research institutions. The planned 99-square-kilometer Nansha Science City already hosts facilities such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Pearl Science Park and the Southern Marine Science and Engineering Guangdong Laboratory, and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (Guangzhou) is set to enroll students on a campus there ([Xinhua](#), June 19, 2022; [GuangzhouGov](#), April 20, 2023).

Nansha's Qingsheng District is home to many firms in industries aligned with Xi Jinping's strategic imperatives. Over 400 AI companies have chosen Qingsheng for its robust industry-academia-research ecosystem ([State Council](#), June 19, 2022). Indeed, the district plans to build a 3000-acre AI industrial park in about five years, aiming to create an AI industry cluster and become a leading example of a smart city ([Sohu](#), February 26, 2019). Similarly, Qingsheng has dedicated areas for road testing and R&D of autonomous vehicles ([Baijiahao](#), March 29, 2018).

Transforming scientific research into technology products is a stated objective of the project ([GuangzhouGov](#), April 20, 2023). This is exemplified by the relocation of aerospace firm CAS Space (aka Zhongke Aerospace Exploration Technology (中科宇航探索技术)) to Nansha. CAS Space, as its name suggests, realizes and commercializes research conducted by the Chinese Academy of Sciences ([S&T Commission of the Shanghai Municipality](#), January 15). Beyond state subsidies, there is an additional geographic logic to producing rockets at Nansha. Its proximity to China's Hainan launch site and its convenience for maritime launch missions demonstrates the wider benefits of location underpinning the success of the GBA megaregion ([Xinhua](#), June 19, 2022).

Conclusion

Beijing seems to be making progress on its goals for the Greater Bay Area initiative. Strategic hubs like the Hetao-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Science and Technology Innovation Cooperation Zone and the Guangzhou Nansha Qingsheng District are concentrating talent and resources in the AI, aerospace, and biomedical

technology sectors. The synergy between Hong Kong's international status and the Pearl River Delta's robust innovation infrastructure is creating a dynamic ecosystem to rival that of Silicon Valley.

Investigating subnational projects such as the GBA initiative are vital for understanding how the PRC's plans are enacted on the ground. Given that technology transfer remains part of Beijing's strategy, and that the GBA initiative functions in tandem with the strategy of military-civil fusion, the importance of the GBA for the PRC's broader national strategy requires closer scrutiny. This can then inform policies that are more effectively aligned with the realities of China's regional developments, enabling nations to effectively navigate the complex landscape of international relations and technological competition with China.

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Notes

[1] The CCP has pushed for greater economic and social integration with Hong Kong and Macau since the late 1990s. Progress was made in particular during the Hu Jintao era, when the phrase "Greater Bay Area" started to appear. United Front work has long supported the effort to integrate the two autonomous regions with the mainland cities surrounding the Pearl River Delta in order to further assert the Party's control. This extends to official media in Hong Kong promoting a "GBA cultural identity," intended to supersede that of Hong Kong.

[2] See, for example, Wu Weiping & Piper Gaubatz, *The Chinese City*, (Routledge 2020), for a good introduction.

[3] Huang, Yasheng. *The Rise and the Fall of the EAST: How Exams, Autocracy, Stability, and Technology Brought China Success, and Why They Might Lead to Its Decline*. Yale University Press, August 2023.

China's Universal Periodic Review Tracks Its Influence At The UN

by Anouk Wear



Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Room at the United Nations, Geneva. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary

- Analysis of trends across three previous UPRs (2009, 2013, and 2018) suggests an increase in PRC influence in the UN. Over time, there has been an increase in approving questions from PRC-friendly states, diluting criticism and highlighting the PRC's ability to garner international support.
- Across the three-hour review of human rights, each UN Member State has less than one minute to ask questions of the PRC, making it difficult to effectively raise concerns about its human rights record.
- The next UPR of the PRC is scheduled for January 23, 2024, in Geneva, providing a politically significant event to analyze China's relations with other UN Member States.

On January 23, 2024, the United Nations (UN) Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) will take place in the Human Rights and Alliance of Civilizations Room at Palais des Nations in Geneva ([OHCHR](#), Accessed January 15). The UPR is a small but politically significant event which can be productively analyzed as a litmus test for the state of PRC's relations with other UN Member States in addition to its role as a tool for raising awareness about human rights and providing accountability. The last review was in 2018.

The UPR Process

The UPR itself is a three-hour review of human rights in the PRC conducted by all other UN Member States. In preparation for this, the UN Secretariat invites NGOs to make submissions concerning human rights in China, which they publish ([United Nations](#), accessed January 16). They also publish a summary of these NGO submissions in a stakeholder report, which is released alongside a report of the UN's findings on the PRC (a compilation of the UN's statements, reports, and findings on the PRC since the previous UP), and the PRC's own national reports ([United Nations](#), accessed January 16).

The review is further facilitated by a 'troika' of three States. For the 2024 UPR, these states will be Albania, the United Arab Emirates, and Malawi, a trio which has raised concerns about the neutrality of the process ([United Nations](#), accessed January 16).

The review session will include statements from the PRC and the UN Secretariat based on their coordination and compilation of information. Next, all UN Member States can make a comment, typically by providing a Recommendation to the PRC. Such a Recommendation should ideally provide constructive suggestions for how the PRC might improve their human rights policies and practices. However, these comments are heavily politicized and range from serious criticism of the PRC's human rights violations to abstentions and to compliments on the human rights record from the PRC's friends. Furthermore, because so many States want to make a comment, and the time is divided to accommodate all speakers, each State is expected to speak for 45–55 seconds. States can also submit Advanced Questions before the day of the review, which can further highlight specific issues.

Diplomats regularly express their frustrations at the limited amount of time. Not only is it not sufficient to address the PRC's human rights record, it is diluted by the PRC's friends who use their allotted time for comments that many see as time-wasting. Thus, the result of the UPR is a series of very short comments, reflecting thin distillation of a State's human rights and other priorities in relation to the PRC. Some of these will be adversarial, whereas others will tow the PRC's line and language. The UPR can therefore be productively analyzed as a litmus test for the PRC's relations with the UN and its Member States.

Trends Across Three Previous UPRs

The 2009 UPR

In 2009, the year of the First UPR Cycle, the PRC was in a vastly different era. Domestically, the 2008 Beijing Olympics had just ended, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) was the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese President, and despite human rights violations, the West was optimistic about China's rise (see for example, [China Brief](#), May 15, 2009; [China Brief](#), September 22, 2008).

The UN produced a 16-page summary of the NGO submissions ([United Nations](#), January 5, 2009) which included (racial) equality and non-discrimination, liberty and security of the person, administration of justice, including impunity and the rule of law, right to privacy, freedom of religion or belief, expression, association and peaceful assembly, and right to participate in public and political life, right to work and to just and favorable conditions of work, and others.

Hong Kong is mentioned in five of the submissions. Many of the Mainland Chinese NGOs were officially registered in "Hong Kong, China," which reflects how the city was seen as a distinctly separate, safer, and freer place for human rights advocacy. A Hong Kong Human Rights Commission constituted a coalition of 11 NGOs, while the Tibet UPR Forum and the Tibetan Women's Association coordinated joint NGO action (these latter two are diasporic groups). Tibet is mentioned 11 times, and Xinjiang four times. The UN's own report included just one mention of Hong Kong, seven mentions of Tibet, and two of Xinjiang/Uighur people ([United Nations](#), December 16, 2008).

In their national report, the PRC's "basic position on human rights and the situation of human rights in China" included urging the international community to "respect the principle of the indivisibility of human rights and attach equal importance to civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights as well as *the right to development*" (emphasis added). The PRC reiterated their commitment to "engaging in exchanges and cooperation with other countries in the field of human rights and to promoting the adoption by the international community of a *fair, objective, and non-selective* approach to the handling of human rights issues" (emphasis added) ([United Nations](#), November 10, 2008).

We can trace the origins of the PRC's current international legal language on human rights to documents such as these. However, what was decidedly more subtle in 2008 is now much more aggressive and uncompromising, especially in their selective insistence on certain rights while undermining or dismissing others. Notably, the earlier language still acknowledges the indivisibility of human rights and their equal importance, and promotes the PRC's position as a different perspective rather than as a radically different framework in the form it takes today.

The 2013 UPR

By 2013 and the onset of the Xi era in China, the PRC's political and human rights circumstances had changed, as had its relationships with the UN and the international order. This is reflected in the UPR reports

and recommendations. The UN's summary of stakeholder submissions was now 18 pages long, indicating an uptick in NGO submissions and wider range of topics. However, both NGOs and the UN could now critique the PRC's reaction and responses to the first review. Here certain promises made by the PRC had not yet been met. This suggests that while the UPR is a helpful benchmark for accountability, the lack of enforcement mechanisms leave little incentive for States to change their behavior beyond "naming and shaming" ([United Nations](#), July 30, 2013).

Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet are listed several times in the 2013 report. The establishment of many new Hong Kong organizations to report on the local situation (as opposed to Mainland Chinese or international NGOs based in the city) was a significant development. Hong Kong was a hub where one could be close enough to Mainland China and yet report what is happening to the outside world. The report also includes an increasing number of NGO submissions from the PRC, and PRC-friendly states such as Cuba, which submitted positive reports on the human rights situation.

The PRC's national report echoed the 2009 submission, highlighting efforts to promote and protect human rights in the PRC. It explained that "The Chinese Government is working to explore paths for human rights development, establishing a robust system of human rights safeguards, and continuously enriching the theory of human rights, all *within the framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics*" (emphasis added) ([United Nations](#), August 5, 2013). The evolution of the PRC's human rights language here indicates that human rights are no longer seen as "indivisible and equal," and now depend on the PRC framework.

The 2018 UPR

The PRC's most recent UPR reflects a rapidly changing regime, including its internal and external stance and behaviors, which are reflected through the lens of human rights. This regime is now an emerging global superpower that strives to shape international law and norms surrounding human rights and beyond, rather than just comply with them ([China Brief](#), March 26, 2018; [China Brief](#), June 5, 2018).

The UN's third report of NGO submissions was 20 pages long and contained critical omissions. Apparently due to PRC pressure on the UN Secretariat, the omissions related to seven NGO submissions regarding human rights violations of the PRC's Uyghur population ([Human Rights Watch](#), November 5, 2018). The UN Secretariat later amended the report by adding a Corrigendum with the relevant information, albeit too late. ([United Nations](#), November 5, 2018). Within the report, Hong Kong is mentioned ten times, while Tibet is mentioned five times and Xinjiang twice. Given the deterioration of human rights in the intervening years across these regions, these comparatively low numbers are reflective of PRC pressure ([United Nations](#), September 3, 2018).

The PRC National Report expresses its support for the UPR and efforts in implementing the 204 out of the 252 Recommendations that they accepted in the Second Cycle. On the linguistic front, there is a new and substantive section on "The concept and theoretical system of human rights with Chinese characteristics" which elaborates on how human rights are "Guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." This means that "China attaches great importance to the promotion and

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protection of human rights, ever acting as *an advocate, practitioner, and promoter of the cause of protecting human rights and always following the road of developing human rights with Chinese characteristics*” (emphasis added) ([United Nations](#), August 20, 2018). Brave readers can click the hyperlink to read all seven paragraphs about this in detail. This markedly different language elevates Xi Jinping’s directives above any legal framework governing human rights in the PRC.

Data From Previous Advanced Questions and Recommendations

The Advanced Questions and Recommendations given to the PRC by other States at the first three cycles of the UPR substantiate these trends from a different perspective.

The table below lists countries that submitted Advanced Questions before previous UPR cycles and some of the topics (but not all) that were included.

Advanced Questions						
	Compliance with international law	Hong Kong	Tibet	Xinjiang	Death Penalty	Freedom of expression
2009						
Canada					x	
Czech Republic	x					x
Denmark	x		x			
Latvia	x					
Liechtenstein	x					
Netherlands	x					
Norway	x		x	x	x	
Sweden	x		x	x		x
UK	x		x	x	x	x
2013						
Australia	x					
Bangladesh						
Belgium	x				x	
Canada	x		x	x		x
Cuba*						
Czech Republic	x					x
Myanmar		x				
Spain						

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2018						
Australia	x			x		
Austria			x	x	x	
Belgium	x		x	x		
Bolivia*	x				x	
Cambodia*	x					
Canada						
Cuba*	x					
Germany	x	x			x	x
Laos*	x					
Nepal*	x					
Netherlands	x	x		x		
Norway	x			x	x	x
Pakistan*	x					
Philippines	x					
Portugal**	x					
Slovenia	x					
Spain	x					
Sweden	x		x	x		x
Switzerland	x	x				
UK			x	x		x
Uruguay						
USA	x	x		x		x
Venezuela*	x					
Viet Nam*	x					
Australia	x			x		

*Indicates that the question the country asked was a 'positive' one, which praised the PRC's human rights record

**On behalf of the Group of Friends on NMIRF's ('national mechanism for implementation, reporting and follow-up')

Source: author's own, data from [United Nations](#), undated.

Initially, fewer countries submitted questions, and those questions genuinely criticized, raised concerns about, and asked for more details regarding specific topics. However, PRC-friendly states gradually began to submit questions that praised the PRC. Consider this Advanced Question, from Cuba in 2013: “China has made great achievements in the promotion and realization of the right to development. Would China share its experience in this regard?” The rapid increase of these questions reflects the PRC’s increasingly friendly relations with UN Member States and its ability to ask them to submit these supportive questions. This tactic strategically distorts the historical record and takes up time which could be spent addressing genuine human rights violations in the PRC. The PRC uses this to dilute and distract from criticism. Similarly, the oral Recommendations made by UN Member States at the UPR reveal that the PRC is able to garner increasing international support and influence States to endorse their strategies at the UN, rather than constructively criticize the PRC despite this being the main purpose of the UPR.

There are other trends which hew more closely to the spirit of the UPR process. These include more countries asking the PRC to comply with international law—one of the core goals of the UPR process—and an increasing interest in Hong Kong and Xinjiang as the human rights violations worsened, drawing more coverage in international media.

Tracking Recommendations that begin with “Continue” can help quantify these trends. Such Recommendations generally imply that the PRC is doing well in its human rights and should continue with the same efforts. For example, in 2018, the Russian Federation recommended that the PRC “Continue to improve its system of legislative protection of human rights in accordance with its international obligations”—a very strong endorsement of their human rights policies and a testament to their friendship. Meanwhile, New Zealand recommended that the PRC “Continue to reform towards abolition of the death penalty.” This is a sign of encouragement, although perhaps overly optimistic. (New Zealand’s other recommendations were more critical.)

States Making Recommendations Beginning "Continue"			
	2009	2013	2018
State			
Afghanistan			x
Algeria	x	x	
Angola	x		x
Argentina		x	
Azerbaijan		x	x
Bahrain	x		x
Bangladesh		x	x
Belarus		x	x

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Belgium		x	
Benin			x
Bhutan	x	x	x
Bolivia			x
Botswana		x	
Brazil	x		
Brunei Darussalam		x	x
Bulgaria		x	
Burundi			x
Cambodia		x	x
Cameroon			x
Chile		x	x
Congo		x	x
Cuba		x	x
Djibouti		x	x
Dominican Republic			x
DPRK		x	x
DR Congo			x
Ecuador		x	
Egypt	x	x	x
El Salvador			x
Equatorial Guinea			x
Eritrea		x	x
Ethiopia		x	x
Fiji			x
Gabon		x	x
Georgia			x
Germany	x		
Ghana			x
Greece			x
Guatemala		x	

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Guinea			X
Guyana			X
Hungary		X	X
Iceland		X	
India		X	X
Indonesia		X	X
Iran		X	X
Iraq			X
Jordan	X		X
Kenya		X	X
Kuwait			X
Kyrgyzstan		X	X
Laos			X
Latvia		X	X
Lebanon			X
Lesotho		X	
Madagascar			X
Malaysia		X	X
Maldives			X
Mali		X	
Malta			X
Mauritius		X	
Moldova			X
Mongolia		X	
Morocco		X	X
Mozambique	X	X	X
Myanmar		X	X
Namibia		X	X
Nepal		X	X
New Zealand		X	X
Nicaragua	X		

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Niger		x	
Nigeria		x	x
Pakistan		x	x
Peru			x
Philippines	x		x
Portugal		x	
Qatar		x	x
Republic of Korea		x	x
Romania		x	
Russian Federation	x	x	x
Rwanda		x	
Saudi Arabia			x
Senegal		x	x
Serbia		x	x
Seychelles			x
Singapore		x	x
South Africa			x
Sri Lanka		x	
Syrian Arab Republic		x	x
Tajikistan		x	
Tanzania			x
Thailand			x
Togo		x	x
Tunisia			x
Turkmenistan		x	x
UAE	x	x	
Uganda			x
Ukraine		x	
Uzbekistan			x
Venezuela		x	x
Viet Nam	x	x	x

Yemen	x	x	x
Zambia			x
Zimbabwe	x	x	x

Source: author's own, data from [United Nations](#), undated.

Analysis of these Recommendations indicates that the PRC's supporters at the UN have grown enormously, particularly in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. Beyond dramatic regional changes, the analysis demonstrates which individual Member States consistently support the PRC in this forum versus those who have only done so recently or sporadically. Member States listed in just the first column appear to be less optimistic about the PRC's desire to improve their human rights record today, compared to 2009.

There are many alternative ways to analyze the data. For instance, focusing on a specific topic or on more nuanced language would reveal trends between the PRC and the UN Member States in more detail. In particular, it would be fruitful to map this data onto those countries who have signed up to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This would measure any shift in how Member States support the PRC at the UPR after signing on to Xi's flagship foreign policy project. This could also elucidate how the PRC uses its language around human rights—especially the right to development—in both the BRI and at the UN.

Conclusion

The UPR serves as a useful litmus test for measuring the PRC's relationships with UN Member States and how they have evolved over time. At a minimum, data from UPR submissions over the last fifteen years can be used as a proxy for states' public friendliness toward the PRC. However, it has potential to substantiate more granular analysis, in particular when cross-referenced with other data and trends related to the PRC's global expansion and global governance.

The Fourth UPR cycle, taking place on January 23, 2024, will provide an update on these positions and trends including a wealth of additional data across Advanced Questions, UN statements, and Member States' Recommendations. These will enhance our understanding of the nature and scope of China's influence across the world.

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GM Soybeans And China's Food Security Dilemma

by Genevieve Donnellon-May



Genetically Modified soybeans, with a sign saying “genetically modified.” (Source: [Sohu](#))

Executive Summary

- The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA) recently approved 37 genetically modified (GM) corn varieties and 14 GM soybean varieties after a three-year trial, marking the first such announcement by the PRC government.
- The PRC's focus on improving food security is evident in legislative and policy measures, including the Food Security Law set to take effect on June 1, 2024, emphasizing domestic production and self-sufficiency.
- Public opposition to GM crops, fueled by concerns over biosafety and distrust of the government, has slowed commercialization efforts, despite reassurances about safety, quality, and endorsements from prominent scientists. The PRC government faces challenges in shifting public sentiment in the short term.
- China's ongoing food security challenges include being a net importer, concerns about overreliance on international markets, and issues like water scarcity, soil pollution, and competing land uses.

Last month, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) approved 37 genetically modified (GM) corn varieties and 14 GM soybean varieties after a three-year trial. [1] These varieties have been bred for stronger herbicide or insect resistance and produce higher yields compared to conventional ones ([MARA](#), December 7, 2023). The announcement was the first of its kind by the PRC government, and follows a decision from a national committee established by the agriculture ministry in October ([MARA](#), October 27, 2023; see also [MARA](#), November 28).

The PRC's move to introduce the cultivation and commercialization of GM seeds is part of a broader effort to increase domestic food production, achieve self-sufficiency, and thereby reduce reliance on global markets. These aims are the result of national security concerns as the country seeks to insulate itself from a volatile international environment, but also of domestic issues. Feeding a growing and increasingly prosperous population from a dwindling and depleted arable landmass necessitates agricultural reform across several domains. But obstacles to this reform have proven difficult to overcome.

China's Soybean Reliance And Vulnerabilities

Soybeans are crucial to China's food security and are commonly used in animal food, human food, and industrial products. Although the PRC is a major soybean grower with current output estimated at nearly 21 million metric tons (mmt), the country is also the world's largest soybean importer ([State Council](#), January 19, 2023). In 2023, Chinese soybean purchases reached nearly 85.4 mmt—an 11.4 percent increase from 2022 ([Sina Finance](#), January 16). These imports came mainly from the United States, Brazil, and Argentina.

China's import reliance is a reversal from the early days of the PRC. From 1949 up to the mid-1990s, the PRC was the world's largest producer and a net exporter of soybeans. However, World Trade Organization accession negotiations forced Beijing to lower its overall agricultural tariffs and subsidies to the domestic agricultural industry. [2] Without the protections afforded to an insulated economy, the domestic industry shrank rapidly. Between 2008 and 2013, the area dedicated to soybean production decreased 24 percent. Meanwhile, imports skyrocketed from around 1 mmt in 1996 to more than 110 mmt in 2021 ([China Daily](#), April 14, 2016; [Reuters](#), January 14, 2022).

Imported soybeans are genetically modified and are mainly processed to produce meal for animal feed and cooking oil. (Soybean oil is the primary edible oil in China, accounting for about 42 percent of the total edible oil consumption in the country. [3] Locally produced soybeans are non-GM and primarily used for direct human consumption (e.g., as tofu, soymilk, and soy sauce). Consumption of edible oils and soybean meal has outpaced the growth of the consumption of soybean food products. [4] Further increases are expected as rising incomes and urbanization shift consumption habits and dietary preferences, such as increased consumption of livestock (which feed on soybeans), soybean-based foods, and nutritional supplements ([US Department of Agriculture](#), March, 2019).

China's food security has deteriorated significantly in recent decades. In 2004, China moved from being a net exporter of food to a net importer. The widening import-export gap has raised concerns about an overreliance on international markets for food supplies, as this could make China vulnerable to export bans and *global*

food price fluctuations. Moreover, skyrocketing food consumption coupled with the loss of viable farmland have made these issues more acute. China has limited water resources and arable land, significant soil pollution, and competing land uses ([Xinhuanet](#), November 20, 2016; see also [National Soil Pollution Survey](#), April 17, 2014).

Geopolitical tensions have informed the PRC's views on food security. Reliance on foreign soybeans was a weakness that was exploited during the Trump-era trade war. It remains a weakness, as soybeans constituted nearly half of record-high agricultural exports from the United States in 2023 ([US Department of Agriculture](#), January 6, 2023). Global food security is increasingly dependent on the movement of food from a few major breadbasket regions to food-deficit areas across the world, often through "food chokepoints." Beijing worries that food supply (both in terms of availability and prices) could be affected by potential maritime embargoes in the instance of conflict in the South China Sea or over Taiwan.

Policy And Legislative Solutions

Improving food security has been a consistent priority for Xi Jinping ([NPC](#), March 3, 2010; [Xinhua](#), September 22, 2022). He famously declared that the rice bowls of China's 1.4 billion people "will always be firmly held in their own hands (牢牢端在自己手中)" ([State Council](#), September 22, 2022).

The PRC's focus is evident in its legislative and policy measures. The 2015 National Security Law (国家安全法) was crucial, enshrining various aspects of food security as tasks for preserving overall national security ([Xinhua](#), July 1, 2015). More recently, a report from the State Council to the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress (NPC) proposed eight tasks to ensure national food security, including strengthening the country's capacity-building. Xi's remarks at the Central Rural Work Conference reaffirmed this, stressing that both Party committees and governments must be held accountable for food security ([PRC State Council](#), December 20, 2023; [Xinhua](#), December, 2023). Similarly, the current Five-year Plan highlights food security, while 2023's "No.1 policy document" (the country's rural blueprint) emphasizes that "a strong country must first have a strong agricultural [sector] (强国必先强农)," and explicitly ties food security to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era and the concept of "Chinese-style Modernization" ([MARA](#), February 14, 2023; [State Council](#), March 7, 2023).

On June 1 this year, the PRC's Food Security Law (粮食安全保障法) will come into effect ([wikisource](#), accessed January 16). Adopted by the NPC on December 29, 2023, the law builds on these previous pieces of legislation, as well as the 2022 "Black Soil Protection Law (黑土地保护法)" and the 2021 "Anti-Food Waste Law (反食品浪费法)" ([NPC](#), June 1, 2023; [NPC](#), April 29, 2021).

GM crops provide a clear solution to bolstering domestic production and enabling further self-sufficiency. They could allow Beijing to meet its targeted domestic soybean output of 23 million tons by 2025 ([MARA](#), December 29, 2021). Specific legislation has been passed here, including rules for registration requirements for herbicides used on GM crops ([MARA](#), March 25, 2022); the 14th Five-Year Plan on Bioeconomy (2021-

2025), which emphasizes modernizing bio-agriculture ([NDRC](#), May 10, 2022); and a certification standard for GM crops, helping to clear the path for domestic commercialization, including for soybeans ([Global Times](#), June 8, 2022).

Some progress has been made on the ground. In 2021 MARA laid out a clear path for seed makers to seek approval for corn varieties that integrate GM traits ([Reuters](#), November 15, 2021). In 2023 MARA announced that it would plant around 4 million mu (660,000 acres, or 1 percent of the country's corn fields), with GM corn that year ([Reuters](#), February 17, 2023). It also expanded a pilot program planting GM soybeans in 20 counties across five provinces (Hebei, Jilin, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region) ([Caixin](#), August 25, 2023). Beijing has not yet stated that it aims to commercialize GM crops for domestic human consumption, but such a development would fit into the broader context of responses to China's concerns over food security.

The majority of investment in GM crop development comes from the government. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and research centers (such as the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences, a national research institution directly under MARA) (see also [State Council](#), October 4, 2021) have a broad mandate encompassing research and development (R&D). Over 7,600 seed companies make up the private sector, though it is only responsible for 10 to 20 percent of R&D ([China Seed](#), August 10, 2023). However, China's overall R&D capabilities are relatively weak due to low investment and weak copyright protection. (Despite ranking first in the world for seed-patent applications, the majority of China's 1,225 patents come from a single SOE ([South China Morning Post](#), July 1, 2023).)

SOEs such as China National Agrochemical Corporation (ChemChina) have played a significant role when it comes to acquiring foreign agribusinesses to support domestic GMO research. In 2017, ChemChina acquired Syngenta, a Swiss agribusiness and global powerhouse in GMO crop development, for \$43 billion, thereby becoming one of the world's largest agrochemical and seed companies ([Xinhua](#), June 8, 2018). This is only one of several international merges in recent years (see for instance [Reuters](#), July 18, 2017).

Technological solutions are being pursued in Yazhou Bay Science and Technology City. Established a few years ago to support R&D, the area includes Nanfan, the seed "Silicon Valley" and the PRC's largest agricultural breeding base. At present, the Nanfan base houses nearly 800 seed research institutions and businesses ([Global Times](#), April 6, 2023). In an apparent success, cultivars bred in Nanfan constitute over 70 percent of the PRC's approved new crop varieties ([People's Daily](#), June 26, 2023; [HQ News](#), March 23, 2023) such as hybrid-rice varieties ([China Daily](#), April 20, 2020). It is unclear if any GM seed R&D is taking place in Nanfan, but seed companies that are interested in GM seed development such as Dabeinong Group (大北农集团) and Yuan Long Ping High-Tech Agriculture (隆平高科) do have offices or labs there ([China Daily](#), June 1, 2022).

Popular Discontent And Its Management

Commercialization of major GM crops has stalled in part due to public opposition. Consumers have long been skeptical about GM food over concerns that it causes serious illnesses. These concerns have been buttressed by negative voices within the system and food safety scandals. In an influential *Global Times* op-ed in 2013, People's

Liberation Army Major-General Peng Guangqian (彭光谦) claimed that the West was using GM crops to threaten China's food security, and that MARA officials and bio-scientists were being encouraged to commercialize them through bribes from multinational companies ([Huanqiu](#), August 21, 2013). Around the same time, reports of widespread illegal plantation of foreign-developed GM crops fuelled fears about foreign control of China's GMO market ([State Council](#), March 6, 2014). Earlier, in 2008, baby formula contaminated with melamine (a chemical used to make plastic) killed six babies and the poisoning of three hundred thousand children in 2008 ([China Brief](#), October 7, 2008).

Certain Party behaviors exacerbate popular concerns. Top Party leaders have their own food supply chain (特供食品), a practice which dates back to the Mao era ([RFA](#), November 20, 2012). This raises questions over inequality in access to safe food, but also distrust of the government given that the special supply chain is made up of organic produce, rather than GM products. To this end, some argue that opposition to GMOs is not so much an issue with biosafety but rather a means of people to express their distrust of the food system and the government's role in making and carrying out policies pertaining to biotechnology. [5] Opposition to GM products has also extended into local governments. For instance, Heilongjiang, the country's biggest soybean growing region banned the planting of GMOs in 2016, despite conflicting with national policies ([Xinhua](#), December 16, 2016). For this it received rebukes from state media outlets (see also [MARA](#), November 2, 2023). [6]

The government has sought to reassure consumers of the safety and quality of domestic brands and is seeking to improve national food safety standards (e.g. [MARA](#), December 25, 2023). Beijing uses Chinese state and social media as part of the public relations drive to dispel skepticism and has even encouraged Chinese scientists such as Yuan Longping (袁隆平)—considered “the father of hybrid rice”—to endorse GMOs publicly. [7] A Q&A on MARA's website states that “all approved GM [foods] are safe” ([MARA](#), August 24, 2023; see also [MARA](#), July 6, 2023). More innovative solutions to broader food safety concerns have also been undertaken by the private sector, including high-tech solutions that improve supply chain visibility ([Sohu.com](#), May 1, 2022). [8]

The impact of these events on public trust persists, however. In 2018, a nationwide survey found that 46.7 percent of respondents had negative views of GMOs and 14 percent viewed GMOs as a form of bioterrorism aimed at China. Other surveys have reinforced this perspective. [9, 10, 11] Given these facts and the recent history, the PRC government will struggle to shift popular sentiment in the short term.

Conclusion

The PRC has invested a considerable amount in legislative efforts, capital investment, and public information campaigns to increase the country's ability to successfully produce and commercialize GM crops. Despite recent advances in each of these areas, it will be a number of years before China sees widespread cultivation of GM products. Beijing fears that time is not necessarily on its side, however, given internal and external pressures on food security. In the short term, the PRC will remain a net importer of soybeans and other such products, but it may continue diversifying import sources to more 'China-friendly' countries to ensure a stable supply.

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Notes

[1] GM seeds are seeds that have been genetically altered using biotechnology techniques. Genetic modification involves the manipulation of an organism's genetic material (DNA) to achieve desired characteristics such as higher yields and resistance to pests.

[2] Yan, H., Yiyuan, C. and Bun, K. H. (2016). China's soybean crisis: The logic of modernization and its discontents. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 43(2), pp. 373–395.

[3] Zhongtai Securities, https://pdf.dfcfw.com/pdf/H3_AP202106181498513163_1.pdf. Published June 17, 2021.

[4] See also, Gale, F., Valdes, C. and Ash, M. (2019). Interdependence of China, United States, and Brazil in soybean trade. *US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) Report*, pp. 1–48.

[5] Xiao, Zhihua, and William A. Kerr. "The political economy of China's GMO commercialization dilemma." *Food and Energy Security*. 11.3 (2022): e409.

[6] Zhang, Hongzhou, and Alfred M. Wu. "Central-Local Relations in China: A Case Study of Heilongjiang's GMO Ban." *The China Quarterly* (2023). Given Heilongjiang's financial interest in locally produced soybeans, the GMO ban could be considered as a form of protectionism to protect local farmers from competition from cheaper GM imports, rather than food safety considerations.

[7] Ibid.

[8] At the extremes, these include "blockchain chicken farms," "Gogochicken," and animal facial recognition, which allow consumers to monitor the age, location, and even the distance walked each day of the poultry they are buying, as well as for better health monitoring.

[9] Cui, K., Shoemaker, S.P. Public perception of genetically-modified (GM) food: A Nationwide Chinese Consumer Study. *npj Sci Food* 2, 10 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41538-018-0018-4>

[10] Deng, Haiyan, and Ruifa Hu. "A crisis of consumers' trust in scientists and its influence on consumer attitude toward genetically modified foods." *British Food Journal* 121.10 (2019): 2454-2476.

[11] Other studies suggest that perceptions might be changing, however. One finds that 40 percent of Chinese respondents accept GM-labelled foods. (Zhao, Yawei, et al. "The Chinese public's awareness and attitudes toward genetically modified foods with different labeling." *npj Science of Food* 3.1 (2019): 17.)