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**Shifting Discourse Between Xi and Putin On Ukraine**

*by Arran Hope*



Xi shakes hands with Putin in Beijing, October 18, 2023. (Source: [Gov.cn](http://Gov.cn))

**Executive Summary:**

- Across 12 communiqués, meeting readouts, and official phone calls between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin since February 2022, the salience of language on Ukraine has reduced, but the substance has hardened. The latest communiqué includes a statement that “the root causes must be eliminated” and a reference to the “indivisibility of security.”
- Other linguistic changes include the disappearance of the phrases “changes unseen in a century” and “a new type of international relations” this year, which occurred frequently in last year’s messaging.
- The latest communiqué appears to be the first time that Russia has explicitly endorsed the PRC’s desire for unification with Taiwan—yet another instance of the two states growing bolder in their international claims.

On May 16, Vladimir Putin, newly returned as president of the Russian Federation, traveled to Beijing. There, he was met by President Xi Jinping for their annual in-person meeting. Coverage from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) noted that the two countries' bilateral relations "have weathered wind and rain, have become stronger over time, and have withstood the tests of the unpredictability of international storms (中俄关系历经风雨, 历久弥坚, 经受住了国际风云变幻的考验)" ([FMPRC](#), May 16). The meeting was accompanied by the signing and release of a Joint Communique (联合声明) ([MFA](#), May 16). These two documents are part of the regular rhythm of Sino-Russian relations in the "new era." Between these annual peaks in diplomatic activity, the two leaders—and self-described "old friends (老朋友)"—engage in a number of other conversations, both in person and over the phone ([Youtube.com/CCTV](#), May 17).

Since the beginning of February 2022, in addition to signing three joint communiqués, the two men have met in person five times (three times to coincide with the communiqués, and also at the Beijing Winter Olympics on February 4, 2022; in Uzbekistan on September 15, 2022; and in Beijing at the Belt and Road Summit on October 18, 2023), and have conducted four phone calls (on February 25, 2022; on New Year's Eve, 2022; on New Year's Eve, 2023; and on February 9, 2024). The readouts and texts of these 12 exchanges and agreements provide a window onto the relative priorities of the two sides. The general trend is one of increased convergence of interests in deepening of the relationship. Changes in the language, in terms of shifts in particular formulations, the omission of certain phrases, and the incorporation of new terms, may carry implications for the relationship. Several are worthy of mention here.

### **The Fall of Ukraine**

One current that flows through these communiqués and conversations is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The first meeting and communique took place shortly before Russian troops set foot in Ukrainian territory; the first phone call was held the day after the war had begun; and the rest have occurred in the shadow of the conflict. There are some consistencies across the last 28 months. For instance, whenever the war is mentioned, it is referred to mainly as the "Ukraine crisis (乌克兰危机)," and less frequently as the "Ukraine issue (乌克兰问题)"—it is not referred to as a war (or even a "special military operation," to use a preferred Russian characterization).

The first phone call, on February 25, 2022, is in many ways an anomaly ([MFA](#), February 25, 2022). Other calls always describe the relationship in positive tones, noting the "the spirit of mutual support and friendship (友好的精神)," "permanent good-neighborliness (永久睦邻友好)," or the desire to "maintain close contacts (我愿同普京总统保持密切交往)." This first call, however, dispensed with such niceties. Xi frostily pointed out that "recent dramatic changes in the situation in eastern Ukraine have drawn great attention from the international community," and warned that the PRC would "decide on its position based on the merits of the Ukrainian issue itself." Such a terse exchange is likely a reflection of the PRC's initial shock at Putin's decision to invade, and an uncertainty about how best to respond. As the war has progressed, however, any disagreement has been washed away. As Xi put it in the most recent call, on February 9:

“Looking back on the road we have traveled, we have weathered many storms together.” References to storms, turbulence, and inclement weather, are frequent euphemisms deployed to describe an adverse international environment.

Across the three joint communiqués, the variation in the level of attention paid to Ukraine is stark. The first communiqué was issued before the invasion, so naturally does not directly refer to Ukraine. The second and third communiqués map onto each other more closely, however. The second contains nine sections, the last of which is largely dedicated to the conflict, while the third contains ten, of which the ninth is again focused on Ukraine. In the second communiqué, the Russian side appears willing to make concessions to the PRC in terms of its framing of the conflict, “positively assessing the objective and impartial position of the Chinese side on the Ukrainian issue,” “reaffirming its commitment to restarting peace talks as soon as possible,” and further welcoming the “constructive ideas set out in the document entitled ‘China’s position on the political settlement of the crisis in Ukraine.’” These statements should not be mistaken for any fissures in the relationship. As the communiqué emphasizes throughout, both countries maintain “strong support for each other’s core interests, national sovereignty and territorial integrity” and, crucially, their relationship is “without limits, and there is no forbidden zone for cooperation (没有止境, 合作没有禁区).”

The most recent communiqué, however, has toned down much of this rhetoric. Gone is the reference to a limitless friendship, but gone too is much of the discussion of Ukraine. The coverage in the 2023 communiqué is two thirds longer than that contained in the latest version. Much of this text is almost identical, though there are a couple of differences. Reference to the PRC’s position paper has been dispensed with, for instance ([FMPRC](#), February 24, 2023). In its place is a statement that “the root causes must be eliminated (必须消除危机根源)” and a reference to the “indivisibility of security (恪守安全不可分割).” The latter phrase appears in the 2023 communiqué, but not in the section on Ukraine. Taken together, this could suggest a tacit endorsement of Russia’s claim that its actions in instigating the conflict were legitimate.

### **Additional Linguistic Shifts**

Other changes in the language of these texts are worth noting. In 2023, Xi famously was overheard saying to Putin, “Right now there are changes, the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years. And we are the ones driving these changes together (这也是百年变局的一部分, 我们共同来推动它),” to which Putin replied, “I agree.” This formulation, “changes unseen in a century (百年变局),” was a frequent refrain last year, also appearing in both the two leaders’ in-person meetings as well as their phone calls (see [China Brief](#), November 21, 2023). It did not appear in the 2023 communiqué, so it is unsurprising that it is absent in this year’s. More notable, however, is its absence in the readouts of both the February 9 phone call and the May 16 meeting. It is unclear why this formulation has apparently fallen out of fashion.

A related phrase, the construction of a “new type of international relations,” which did appear in last year’s communiqué, has disappeared this year altogether. The PRC’s three global initiatives have also had mixed

reception in the communiqués. In 2022, the Russian side “reaffirmed its readiness to continue to work on the global development initiatives proposed by China;” in 2023 saw an articulation of all three initiatives individually; but 2024 saw only the Global Development Initiative get a mention by name, while the set were less specifically referred to as “a series of global initiatives have important and active significance (一系列全球倡议).”

Another potentially concerning shift is Russia’s stance on Taiwan. Putin has made a point of affirming the one-China principle in every meeting, call, and communiqué since February 2022, but this year’s communiqué went one step further. This time, the Russian side also “firmly supports the Chinese side’s initiatives to ... achieve national unification (支持中方 ... 实现国家统一的举措).” This appears to be the first time that Russia has endorsed the PRC’s desire for unification with Taiwan—yet another instance of a further emboldening of these two states.

### **Conclusion**

The shift in language pertaining to Ukraine across the readouts of the nine discussions and three communiqués that have been released since February 2022 suggest that, as far as the PRC and Russia are concerned, the “crisis” is now less of a concern. The recalibration of the language, both in terms of the phrases used and the level of attention given to the conflict reflect a degree of confidence on both sides. The PRC is unambiguously supportive of Russia. Initial concerns, which were reflected in a degree of censure on the PRC’s part, have given way to a greater sense of impunity. There is a sense that the Ukraine crisis is manageable, and so sights can now be set on the real task at hand—accelerating the emergence of a multipolar world.

Linguistic analysis of the sort contained above with that of additional official statements and analysis of wider political and geopolitical developments. It reiterates, however, the PRC’s support of Russia, and the conception that the two “exceed” the traditional model of geopolitical alliances, as the 2023 communiqué puts it. There is no clearer statement than one which comes near the top of the latest communiqué: “the development of the Sino-Russian partnership for comprehensive strategic cooperation in the new era is in the fundamental interests of the two countries and peoples (发展中俄新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系符合两国和两国人民的根本利益).”

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**New Textbook Reveals Xi Jinping's Doctrine of Han-Centric Nation-Building**

*by James Leibold*



Front cover of the new textbook *An Introduction to the Community of the Zhonghua Race*. (Source: [Xinhua](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- Another cultural revolution is in full swing in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This is not the purported class revolution Mao advocated in the past, but rather a wave of Han cultural and racial nationalism.
- Xi's new approach to ethnic minority policy repudiates the Party's past promise to allow minority nationalities to exercise political and cultural autonomy, becoming "masters of their own house."
- Following more than ten years of incremental change, a new textbook from scholar-officials articulates the discourse, ideology, and policies associated with a new Han-centric narrative of China's past and future.
- In this conception, the sovereignties and homelands of the Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongol, and other indigenous minorities are erased and replaced with a seamless teleology of the Han colonial and racial becoming.

*An Introduction to the Community of the Zhonghua Race* (中华民族共同体概论), [1] a new compulsory textbook for university students across the People's Republic of China (PRC), was published in February (SCMP, March 18). It offers the clearest and most complete articulation of President Xi Jinping's new orthodoxy for governing the PRC's "unified multiethnic state." The ideas presented in the textbook represent a fundamental retreat from a previous approach to ethnic governance, from a paradigm of "Communist multiculturalism" toward Han-centric cultural and racial nationalism. [2]

The PRC Constitution, revised in 2018 under Xi's direction, continues to promise the PRC's 125 million officially recognized "minority nationalities (少数民族)" equality with the country's Han majority, which numbers more than one billion individuals. In the former's respective homelands, the Constitution promises "regional autonomy" so these minorities can "exercise the power of self-governing" (Xinhua, March 22, 2018). This includes the right to "use and develop" their own language and culture. Xi's new doctrine, in contrast, demands their subservience to Han norms, and the slow erasure of their languages, cultures, and identities—making the PRC's minorities, in a sense, colonial subjects of a new Han empire.

### **Xi's 'New Era' of *Minzu* Policies**

It has taken more than a decade for Xi Jinping to re-orient the PRC's *minzu* policies. [3] In 2014, he gave a long and fiery internal speech in Beijing. Top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in charge of "nation-building work (民族工作)" listened intently as Xi outlined his vision for the Party's governance and control over its vast borderlands. Xi demanded an end to the vitriolic bickering over the future direction of policy, which included proposals for everything from an American-style melting pot to a federation of democratic communities (East-West Center, 2013). The Party, he insisted, must "unflinchingly walk the correct road of China's unique solution to the national question," while also "pioneering new thinking" (China Brief, November 7, 2014). The acrimonious, and unusually public, debate over the Party's *minzu* policies did not end with Xi's undisclosed speech.

A new orthodoxy—what is now called "Xi Jinping's important thoughts on strengthening and improving nation-building work"—emerged only slowly in the face of stern opposition from minority and Han officials alike. It required the restructuring of the Party-state bureaucracy, a violent crackdown in Xinjiang and other frontier regions, and the purging of minority officials in charge of "ethnic affairs" (Journal of Contemporary China, October 13, 2019; The Diplomat, May 1, 2021; China Brief, June 20, 2016). These changes gradually narrowed the scope for variation in policy implementation. The bricolage of Party-speak, with its oblique aphorisms like the "two connections (两个结合)" and the "twelve musts (十二个必须)," once left room for a range of interpretations. This permitted some minority officials to try and safeguard aspects of their legal autonomy, but also allowed other officials to craft a new Han-centric truth. Such a plurality of opinions no longer exists in the public sphere. Xi's self-declared "new era" has arrived, and the Party's latest textbook preaches its dogma.

The textbook was edited under the direction of the 64-year-old Han official Pan Yue (潘岳), the colorful Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department in charge of *minzu* work. Pan is also the Director of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (国家民族委员会), the state organ traditionally led by a minority cadre and responsible for safeguarding the legal rights of the PRC's minority communities. Pan, in contrast, has long sought to steer the country in a different direction.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, he portended the dangers of ethnic separatism and the urgent need to revive traditional Zhonghua culture (中华文化) ([China File](#), February 24, 2023). He later joined other scholar-officials like Ma Rong (马戎), Zhu Weiqun (朱维群), and Hu Angang (胡鞍钢) in advocating a “second generation of *minzu* policies” before Xi Jinping took power ([China Brief](#), July 6, 2012). The textbook provides official imprimatur for the once-contrarian views of Pan Yue and other *minzu* policy reformers, which critics once called “both naïve and dangerous from a political perspective” ([CUAES](#), February 23, 2012).

### **Criticizing Past Policies**

*An Introduction to the Community of the Zhonghua Race* is remarkably frank about the need for a course correction. Departing from the Party's call for “positive energy” ([China Media Project](#), April 16, 2021), it speaks of “deep-rooted problems” that “pose a serious challenge” to regime security. This includes not only the “three evil forces” of terrorism, extremism, and separatism, which are stoked from abroad, but also “ideological misunderstandings” and “erroneous views” inside the country. “Some regions,” we are told, are hyping the peculiarities of minority cultures to promote “backward and strange customs and habits” while “some people” are “deliberately accentuating the identity of ethnic minorities, diluting the identity of the Zhonghua race, and consciously or unconsciously ignoring the commonality of the Zhonghua race” (p. 336).

In particular, the textbook is critical of past preferential policies for minorities. It argues they “deviated from their original intention” and “solidified ethnic differences and fostered a narrow ethnic consciousness that gave rise to the false thesis of ‘ethnic minority exceptionalism’” (p. 340). This has caused “some minorities”—again left unnamed, but the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongols are the obvious referent—to distort their histories and “use the protection of cultural diversity to cling to backward ways of life and stereotypes.”

In the past, the Party spent too much time “managing the stomach (管肚子),” naïvely believing economic development would solve all its problems, and not enough time “managing the brain (管脑子).” This second phrase is code for more “thought reform (洗脑),” or what the Party euphemistically called “transformation through education (教育转化)” during the mass internment of Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang's re-education camps ([China Brief](#), May 15, 2018). “Thought reform” also implies the doubling-down on patriotic subjects in education for all students, from preschool to university ([China Brief](#), December 10, 2019).



### **The Teleology of National Becoming**

At its core, the 377-page textbook contains 13 “lectures” on Chinese history. It also contains several introductory and summary chapters outlining the meaning, significance, and implications of the new guiding policy formulation for nation-building work under Xi Jinping, which is called “forging of the communal consciousness of the Zhonghua race (铸牢中华民族共同体意识).”

The historical imaginary behind this molding process is deeply influenced by the late sociologist Fei Xiaotong (费孝通), and his dialectic reading of the “multiple origins, single body (多元一体)” structure of Chinese racial evolution ([Aisixiang](#), August 22, 2010). The ambiguity and double-speak of Fei’s idiom permits different interpretations. Prior to the Xi era, the concept was often translated into English as “unity in diversity” or “diversity in unity” to highlight the rich heterogeneity of the PRC’s fifty-six “nationalities” and their distinct languages, cultures, and religious practices. Today, the “unity” side of Fei’s dyad is paramount, as is a distinct teleology underpinning the Party’s reading of history—namely, from multiple origins toward a single Han-centric geo-body.

The Zhonghua race, according to this theory, emerged some two million years ago with a distinctly Chinese group of hominids. It then organically grew by drawing in and absorbing surrounding peoples into its superior Huaxia-cum-Han core, expanding in size and geographic distribution without either interruption or division. Like a giant “snowball (雪球)” in Fei Xiaotong’s words. In this story of national becoming, Tibetan, Mongol, Uyghur, and other indigenous peoples exist only in their genetic service to an eternally evolving, Han-centric “mega-community (超大规模共同体).”

The textbook offers veiled criticism of Western sinologists, the so-called “new Qing historians” who include Mark Elliott and James Millward. These historians highlight the ruptures, division, and diversity in China’s past. To the textbook’s authors, however, this is an incorrect, “de-sinicized (去中国化)” view of history. Unlike the West, it is claimed, China never engaged in colonial expansion or cultural hegemony. Rather, the tolerance, peace, and openness of Zhonghua civilization led to its natural growth. It therefore surpasses the clash of civilizations, colonialism and plundering, and law of the jungle. China, the textbook argues, pioneered a “new pattern of human civilization,” one that transcends both the superstructure of the empire and nation-state (p. 355).

### **The Han Coagulate Core**

There are hidden contradictions lurking behind the conception of history in Pan Yue’s textbook. On the one hand, there is a desire to see unity as organic, even primordial—rooted in the very blood and soil of China’s past. On the other hand is the insistence on the Party’s urgent need to actively “forge” this collective consciousness. All Party members, we are told, must play an active role in “guiding” PRC citizens to hold the “correct” view of the past, its inalienability, and the necessity for all ethnic groups to “identify with and be loyal to” the Zhonghua race and its nation-state. “The Zhonghua race is absolutely not an ‘imagined community,’”

the authors write, “but rather a mega-national community imbued with the traditions of more than 5000 years of Chinese civilization” (p. 4).

The book criticizes the racism of Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party during the Republican era, yet deploys a remarkably similar argument to the one present in Chiang’s 1943 book *China’s Destiny*. [4] The Zhonghua race might not share a single progenitor, but its fused cultures, geographies, and most importantly, bloodlines allegedly render individual origins and homelands irrelevant. A shared consanguinity is the core of the Zhonghua race and the nation. Chinese civilization, the textbook argues, is built on a “foundation of blood ties” that gave rise to a shared political community around 5000 years ago. The term “blood (血)” is used 65 times, with frequent reference to inter-*minzu* marriages, cultural fusion, inter-regional migration, and “intertwined bloodlines (血脉相连)” across Chinese history.

Like other modern Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping frequently evokes the “large family (大家庭)” metaphor in explaining the relationship between the Han and minority nationalities ([Xinhua](#), September 27, 2019). When Mao Zedong employed the same metaphor at the founding of the PRC, we are told, he was seeking to “reveal the blood relationship of the Zhonghua national family, in which you are in me, and I am in you, and no one can be separated from the other” (p. 323).

Families are often hierarchical and power lies in the patriarch. Although it goes unmentioned, the Huaxia-cum-Han people of the Central Plains are the obvious head of the Zhonghua family. Their large sedentary population, mature written language, and sophisticated political system are not only the core of Chinese civilization but also its racial “coagulate (凝聚),” drawing in, and literally “absorbing (吸收)” surrounding peoples to create today’s organic whole (pp. 103-4).

### **The Four Relationships: Subordinating Minorities**

Han interests are synonymous with those of the nation and the race in Xi’s China. Several years ago, Party officials coined a new term, “the four relationships (四个关系),” [5] to ensure minority communities “correctly grasp” this new reality and their subordinate position within the Han-centric social order ([Qiushi](#), August 30, 2021). These relationships were briefly mentioned in the readout of a 2021 speech by Xi Jinping ([Xinhua](#), August 28, 2021), and are now foregrounded in the introduction to Pan Yue’s textbook.

First, there is the relationship between commonality and difference, where “commonality is dominant, and difference cannot weaken or jeopardize commonality.” Commonality, the textbook declares, “is supreme, the direction, the prerequisite, and fundamental, while respect for and protection of difference is needed, but not to solidify and strengthen ethnic differences, let alone allow difference to impede national integration” (p. 9).

Second, there is the relationship between the consciousness of each ethnic group and the shared consciousness of the Zhonghua race. While the two go “hand in hand,” they are not equal. Rather, the overall interest of the Zhonghua race must come first, and the consciousness of each ethnic group “should be subordinate to and serve the consciousness of the *Zhonghua* race’s community” (Ibid.).

Third, there is the relationship between Zhonghua culture and the cultures of various ethnic groups. “Zhonghua culture is the backbone, and the cultures of all ethnic groups are the branches and leaves. Only when the roots are deep and the trunk is strong can the branches and leaves flourish” (Ibid.). When the textbook talks about the “protection and inheritance” of minority cultures, it mentions food, clothing, song, and dance—the sort of performative “ethnic color” that lacks authenticity and agency—while more meaningful minority languages and religious practices must be sinicized.

Finally, there is the relationship between the material and the spiritual. “Economic and social development does not naturally bring about national unity,” the textbook states. Instead, Party leaders (and teachers in particular) must be “engineers of the soul (人类灵魂的工程师)” ([Xinhua](#), September 10, 2018). They must actively mold the thought, argot, behavior, and bodies of all PRC citizens, with minority nationalities requiring special attention due to their perceived backwardness.

### **Autonomy Cancelled and Homelands Erased**

The Party has retained the concept and system of “regional ethnic autonomy (民族区域自治).” In his 2014 speech, Xi called it the “fountainhead (源头)” of the Party’s nation-building work despite repeated calls for its revision or abandonment by Chinese scholars like Ma Rong ([NEAC](#), November 15, 2014; [Beida](#), October 7, 2019). [6] With legal protection for minority languages and cultures now falling into desuetude, the textbook claims regional autonomy is actually about “safeguarding unity and solidarity” through a series of regional support programs (p. 6). These colonial-style projects, known as “Aid Xinjiang (援疆)” and “Aid Tibet (援藏),” have scaled up dramatically over the last decade ([Nanfang Magazine](#), April 2, 2022). They bring more Han money, talent, and culture into the frontier while breaking down the barriers to what the textbook calls “an interdependent economic organism” (p. 40).

Autonomous regions no longer belong to a single nationality, but rather are “places shared by people of all ethnic groups throughout the country” (p. 322). By insisting on the term Xizang (西藏) in place of Tibet, and promoting regional identities like “Xinjianger (新疆人),” the Party is erasing Tibetan and Uyghur sovereignties, and renegeing on its previous promise to treat these places as autonomous homelands.

While core concepts like autonomy are being reinterpreted, others are being adjusted to alter their meaning. In the past, the system of regional autonomy was said to “fully guarantee” that minority nationalities were “masters of their own house (当家作主)” while “safeguarding their legal rights and interests (保障少数民族合法权益)” ([People’s Daily](#), August 7, 2007). Now, the textbook informs its readers, autonomy is about “ensuring all ethnic groups can be joint masters of their house (各民族共同当家作主)” (p. 17) in order to “better safeguard the legal rights and interests of the masses of all ethnic groups” (p. 9). This rhetorical sleight of hand violates the spirit and letter of the 2001 Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy, rendering it null and void ([AsianLII](#), accessed May 17).

### **Conclusion**

Another cultural revolution is in full swing in the PRC. This is not the purported class revolution Mao advocated in the past, but rather a wave of Han cultural and racial nationalism. By distorting past promises, policies, and histories, Pan Yue's textbook seeks to reconstruct a myth of Han-centrism, one that renders the now-hollow guarantee of minority rights in the PRC Constitution and Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy a mere ornamental fig leaf for Han settler colonialism and indigenous dispossession in once sovereign homelands. Today, there is only one master in the house—Xi Jinping, the chairman of a new Han empire.

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### **Notes**

[1] Book's Writing Team (本书编写组), *An Introduction to the Community of the Zhonghua Race* (中华民族共同体概论). Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe, 2024.

[2] The term "Communist multiculturalism" was coined by Susan McCarthy in her 2009 book *Communist Multiculturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press). In a recent essay for CSIS exploring ideological shifts under Xi Jinping, Wang Jisi (王缉思) notes Xi's promotion of Chinese civilization and history, and argues it seeks "to mobilize Chinese nationalism (essentially Han nationalism) as a powerful resource in the service of the CPC's campaign of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.'" See Wang Jisi, "The Reshaping of China's Ideology and its Implications for International Studies," in *US-China Scholarly Recoupling*, ed. Scott Kennedy (Washington DC: CSIS, 2023).

[3] The Chinese term *minzu* (民族) is notoriously difficult to parse and deeply polysemic across the course of its 100+ years as a part of Chinese discourse. During the early years of the PRC, it was commonly rendered as "nationality," in keeping with the emphasis on multi-ethnic identification and representation as a part of the Marxist-Bolshevik discourse on the "national question" (民族问题). In more recent years, these groups have been re-labeled "ethnicities" as the Party sought to distinguish between officially recognized "ethnic minorities" (少数民族) and the collective "Chinese nation/race" (中华民族). The textbook offers its own overloaded definition of *minzu*, stating this "Han term (汉语)" mixes three Western connotations: first, race (种族), which only looks at physical factors such as skin color and blood; second, ethnic group (族群), which emphasizes common factors such as history, religion, language, and subjective identity; and third, nation (民族), which corresponds to the state, and emphasizes political commonalities such as "sovereignty, territory, and population" (p. 32). In short, depending on the context, the term can be used to index a range of

different English concepts, and to accurately convey those meanings across CCP discourse, I have used a range of English glosses and sometimes leave it untranslated in my text.

[4] Chiang Kai-shek, *China's Destiny and Chinese Economic Theory*. Brill, 2013.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004212732\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004212732_003)

[5] The textbook uses a slightly different formulation: “four pairs of relationships” (四对关系).

[6] In a recent essay, retired Beijing professor Guan Fengxiang speculates Pan Yue is pushing for a new law that would abolish the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy, citing a “tidal wave” of unnamed social media comments. See Guan Fengxiang (关风祥), “The Time-Space Misalignment in Pan Yue’s Theory of National Fusion” (潘岳“民族融合论”的时空错乱), *China in Perspective*, 25 July 2022.  
<https://www.chinainperspective.com/default.php?id=69870>.

**Open-Source Technology and PRC National Strategy: Part II**

*by Sunny Cheung*



A futuristic image depicting the application of open-source technologies in the PRC. (Source: AI-generated)

**Executive Summary:**

- OpenHarmony, an open-source version of Huawei’s HarmonyOS, is widely used in critical infrastructure (such as the energy grid and ports), public security, and the military in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Some of these are projects that support the PRC’s military-civil fusion development strategy.
- OpenHarmony is perceived as a key contributor to accomplishing the PRC’s goals of reducing dependence on foreign technologies and becoming a strong open-source nation.
- The PRC government is cautious about potential cybersecurity issues related to the use of open-source technologies, especially in “AI of Things” applications, which include networked systems of multiple devices in critical domains. They are therefore implementing measures to manage open-source software vulnerabilities, ensuring secure integration into critical infrastructure.
- The PRC is positioning itself as an early innovator in the regulation of open-source software. Governmental bodies such as the Administration of States Secret Protection (NASSP; 国家保密局) and government-affiliated bodies such as the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT; 中国信息通信研究院) are spearheading national-level initiatives.

**Editor's Note:** This article is the second in a two-part series. The first part, which focused on the OpenAtom Foundation and the OpenHarmony operating system, was published in Issue 10 and can be read [here](#).

OpenHarmony, an open-source version of Huawei's HarmonyOS, is perhaps the most successful open-source operating system in the PRC today. It is increasingly used in a variety of sectors, with varying degrees of importance to the country's national security. As such, it is seen as a strategic asset, helping orient the country toward its desired technology- and innovation-based future and achieve the Party's goals of self-reliance and technological sovereignty. By developing its own open-source ecosystem, PRC technology is ultimately likely to have robust cybersecurity, reducing its vulnerability to cyberattacks, and safeguarding its supply chain security. Open-source systems, including OpenHarmony, are also deployed in a variety of national security and military-related applications, while also forming the basis for proprietary software that is used in closed-source military systems. This raises questions about continued international collaboration in the development of open-source technology.

## RISC-V and OpenHarmony Integration

OpenHarmony is a versatile operating system that can run on a broad spectrum of devices powered by RISC-V processors, [1] from tiny sensors to full-scale data centers. Its initial adoption was driven by a perceived need to secure and stabilize supply chains ([China Brief](#), December 15, 2023). OpenHarmony enhances RISC-V's utility across various application scenarios, which makes it increasingly attractive to developers and manufacturers. At the 2023 and 2024 RISC-V summits held in the PRC, the use of OpenHarmony was on full display in new products such as tablets, edge computing gateways, and cloud desktop terminals ([Sina](#), August 29, 2023).



The 2023 RISC-V Summit: A speaker shares how to integrate RISC-V and OpenHarmony in commercial products. (Source: [Sina](#))



The 2024 RISC-V Summit Talk on Promoting RISC-V and OpenHarmony Integration. (Source: [163](#))

The 2023 summit spotlighted initiatives like that of Runkaihong (润开鸿), a subsidiary of Jiangsu Hoperun Software (江苏润和软件), which plans to establish a “full-stack open-source ecosystem (全栈开源生态)” combining RISC-V and OpenHarmony. The company’s vice president stated that RISC-V and OpenHarmony will become the mainstream ISA and OS combination in the “artificial intelligence of things (人工智能物联网)” era in the PRC ([Sina](#), August 29, 2023). At this year’s event, ongoing efforts to speed up the application of these developments and to expand the RISC-V ecosystem were promoted. These included solutions developed in collaboration with the Xuantie Team from Alibaba’s DAMO Academy in the areas of smart finance and transportation (阿里巴巴达摩院玄铁团队) ([163](#), March 18).

### **OpenHarmony Supports ‘Smart China’ Policies**

Open-source systems are at the forefront of the PRC’s efforts to create interconnected and intelligent ecosystems. OpenHarmony constitutes a genuine asset for the PRC by providing significant improvements on previous technologies across various applications. In doing so, they help the country achieve its national goals, including constructing a future that is not dependent on the West.

OpenHarmony has made significant strides in the transportation, energy, manufacturing, and infrastructure sectors. For instance, in Jiangxi Province’s smart tunnel and subway projects, OpenHarmony has been central to developing a “super device management platform (超级设备管理平台)” ensuring that device data is unified and interconnected, enormously improving operational efficiency ([OpenHarmony](#), last accessed May 20). In the port industry, OpenHarmony is used in the network at Tianjin Port, one of the country’s major transport nodes. By collaborating with industry partners, the port developed a system known as “Jinhong (津鸿) OS,” which supports interaction across vehicles, machinery, people, and goods. This “super device” has similarly revolutionized the port’s operations and monitoring capacity ([OpenHarmony](#), last accessed May 20).

OpenEuler, a Linux distribution platform developed by Huawei, is also used in critical infrastructure. For instance, it powers the system for the State Grid’s Dispatch Center (国家电网调度中心) and China

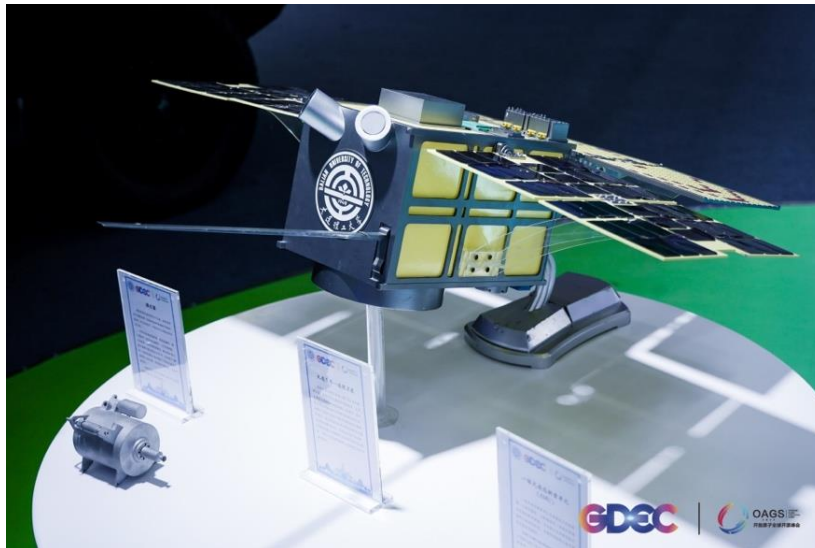


Southern Power Grid (中国南方电网公司) ([OpenEuler](#), last accessed May 20). The National Energy Group (国家能源集团) employs a custom server operating system called CEOS (国能磐石服务器操作系统) that is based on openEuler. This enhances cybersecurity features and improves database server operations, among other benefits ([OpenEuler](#), last accessed May 20).

### **OpenHarmony and the Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy**

OpenHarmony, promoted heavily by the PRC state and by OpenAtom Foundation, exemplifies how open-source ideals can support the PRC's technological ambitions. Its use cases in the PRC space and public security industries are key instances of this.

OpenHarmony is steadily integrating into the space industry, particularly through the OpenHarmony In Space (OHIS) initiative. This initiative, led by the OpenAtom Foundation, involves key partners such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), Dalian University of Technology (DLUT), Tsinghua University, Wuhan University, and several leading aerospace entities ([DLUT](#), June 14, 2023). DLUT has explicit links to the military-civil fusion (MCF) development strategy, and participates in classified defense technology projects ([Xinhua](#), August 2, 2018; [DLUT](#), accessed May 6; see [ASPI unitracker](#), accessed May 6). OHIS has made strides in assisting the launch of several satellites and promoting the use of a domestically produced real-time operating system for space applications.



Dalian No.1—Lianli satellite, the first satellite from Liaoning Province operating on a version of the OpenHarmony OS. (Source: [DLUT](#))

One example of the successful deployment of OpenHarmony is in the Dalian-1 Lianli (sometimes rendered as Dalian 1-Lianli) satellite. This satellite, launched last May, uses domestically produced chips running on a customized OpenHarmony OS ([DLUT](#), May 10, 2023). It can conduct low-cost sub-meter high-resolution observation ([Xianning Net](#), September 8, 2023).

The integration of OpenHarmony with small satellites is particularly revolutionary. Microsatellites (11-200kg) and nanosatellites (1.1-10kgs) have traditionally used operating systems developed overseas, such as VxWorks, FreeRTOS, and  $\mu$ C/OS ([ITHome](#), January 11, 2022). The advent of OpenHarmony has allegedly led to a shift toward standardizing satellite onboard systems in PRC space development, shortening development cycles and boosting the deployment of nearly 2,000 micro and nano satellites. DLUT has spearheaded this development, successfully collaborating with Western institutions like the University of Liège and the Liège Space Center in Belgium to use OpenHarmony for satellite control systems ([ITHome](#), January 11, 2022). Experts involved with the OHIS initiative argue that integrating OpenHarmony with space technology is expected to provide a competitive edge over international standards, like those set by SpaceX's Starlink, and positions the PRC as a leader in space competition ([ITHome](#), January 11, 2022).

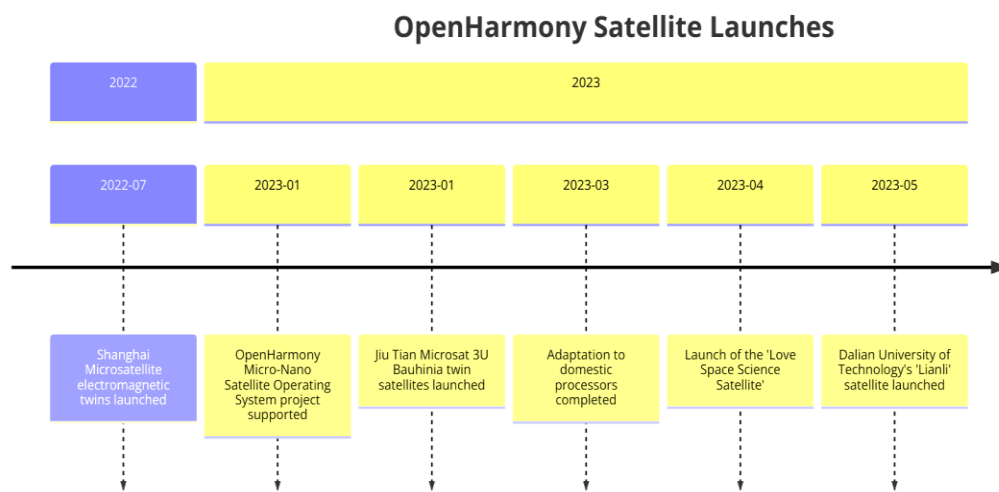


Chart showing recent launches of satellites using OpenHarmony technology. (Source: [OpenHarmony](#))

Another domain where OpenHarmony is widely used is in public security. HM Wiselink (鸿元智通), a leading innovator in the field of industrial internet solutions, has been actively collaborating with the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) since early 2021 ([51CTO](#), March 7). The company has invested significantly in research and development within the OpenHarmony ecosystem. OpenHarmony is claimed as providing enhanced system security, more efficient cloud-edge collaboration, and better scalable AI computational power than alternatives ([Elecfans](#), October 20, 2022). The company has collaborated with OpenAtom on 5G-enabled police vehicles, specifically through variants of the ZHWG-U6082 smart gateway device, which allegedly allows for improved data integration and real-time intelligence ([Elecfans](#), October 20, 2022; [FromGeek](#), March 31). Zhong Wenbin (钟文斌), the firm's General Manager, has recommended the OpenHarmony-based system for mobile police stations, improving command and control (C2) under different social security scenarios. HM Wiselink's software has also been deployed in critical infrastructure, including electric grids and water management systems ([Baijiahao](#), August 28, 2022; [HM Wiselink](#), last accessed April 30). An additional example is the "Electronic Sentinel (电子哨兵)" terminal, which is compatible with

OpenHarmony. This device, launched by IT services company Chinasoft International (中软国际) in January 2023, is used to verify identities and measure body temperatures in real-time, and can connect to others other copies of itself and to a “Super Sentinel” cloud network ([Baijiahao](#), January 11, 2023). This would reinforce the existing mass digital surveillance apparatus.

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) now run on OpenHarmony software too. In April 2023, Shenzhen Kaihong (开鸿) and Zhejiang MMC (科比特) collaborated to produce a drone prototype on display at the OpenAtom Summit 2023 ([Baijiahao](#), October 18, 2023). This collaboration is set to standardize operating systems, interconnection standards, data norms, and business platforms across various UAV applications. MMC, a leading Chinese UAV manufacturer, intend to produce these enhanced drones for smart city management, wind farm inspection, and public safety ([Baijiahao](#), April 14, 2023). Integrating OpenHarmony into UAV systems serves both civic and strategic military ends. Luo Fuqiang (罗富强), a military expert and former commander of PRC’s United Nation peacekeeping forces, has emphasized the potential of Huawei’s HarmonyOS for improving intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, as well as positioning, navigation and timing (PNT) ([Haokan](#), June 6, 2021). His insights, alongside research from the China Ordnance Equipment Group Automation Institute (中国兵器装备集团自动化研究所) on OpenHarmony-based UAV terminal applications, point to a deliberate strategy to actively explore and harness open-source platforms like OpenHarmony for national defense. [2]



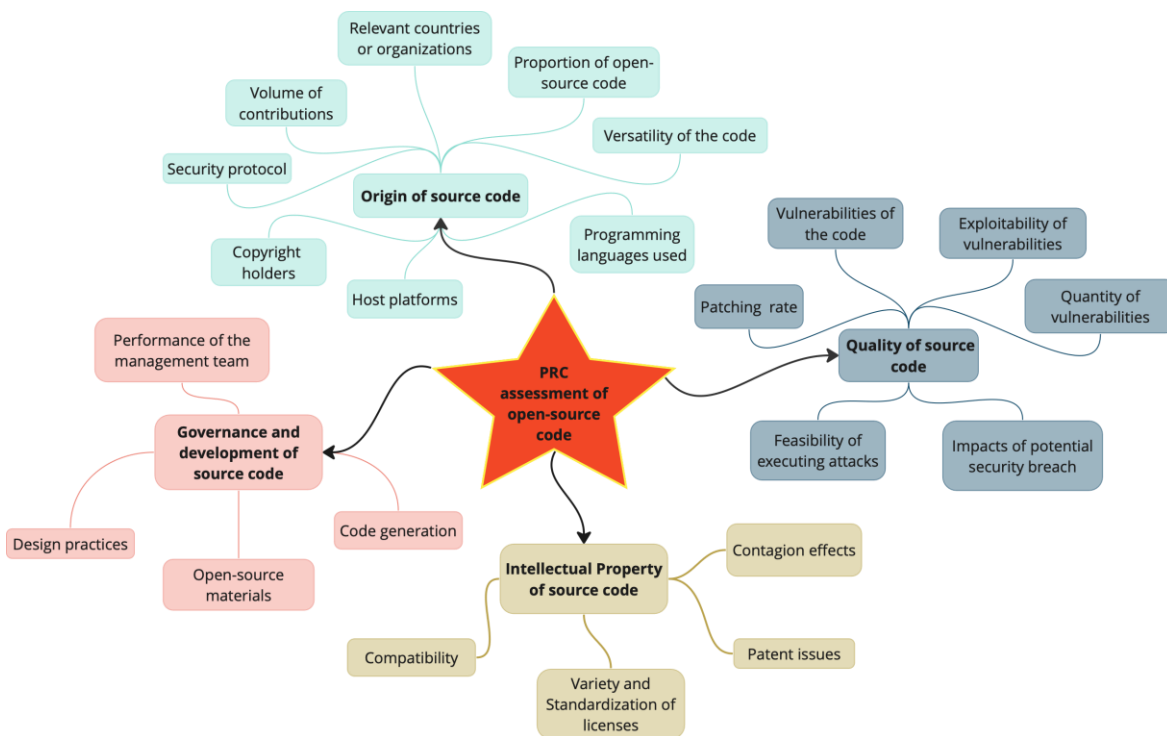
A collaboration agreement signed between Shenzhen Kaihong and Zhejiang MMC. (Source: [Baijiahao](#))

### **China Leads Research on Open-Source Vulnerabilities**

The PRC government recognizes the benefits that open-source projects like OpenHarmony bring to the table, as well as the risks associated with their use. These risks are acute, given how widespread OpenHarmony is in the country’s infrastructure. The government therefore advocates for a balanced approach to technology adoption and integration.

Steps are being taken to formalize the scrutiny and regulation of open-source software ([Sohu](#), November 11, 2022). These are encapsulated in the 2023 national standard initiative led by the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT; 中国信息通信研究院), a research unit under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) that aims to establish a framework for evaluating the security of open-source software. The standard, titled “Information Security Technology—Evaluation Method for Open-Source Code Security of Software Products (信息安全技术 软件产品开源代码安全评价方法),” comprises four distinct evaluation categories that collectively address security considerations necessary for open-source software ([Weixin/CAICT](#), January 16, 2023).

The first category assesses the origin of the open-source code, based on eight indicators. These include the proportion of open-source code, the programming languages used, the copyright holders, the volume of contributions, the versatility of the code, the security protocol, the platforms on which code is hosted and downloaded, and the country or organization with which the code is affiliated. The second category evaluates the code’s quality. Evaluation is based on code vulnerabilities, the exploitability of vulnerabilities, the impact of security breach and exploitation, the assessment of the complexity and feasibility of executing potential attacks, the patching rate, and the quantity of the vulnerabilities. The third category examines intellectual property aspects of the code. For this, there are four indicators: the standardization and variety of open-source licenses, their applications, compatibility with current systems, and patent issues. The fourth category assesses the governance and development of open-source code. Evaluation criteria include the inventory of open-source materials, design practices, code generation, and the performance of the management team which runs the code.



Open-source code assessment mechanism purposed by CAICT. (Source: [Weixin](#))

Together, these standards establish a structured approach to managing the use of open-source software and to ensure its secure and controlled integration into services and infrastructure. This is being done on a level that other countries are yet to match.

The National Administration of State Secret Protection (NASSP; 国家保密局) has also noted concern over the risks of open-source technology. Despite spearheading the New Infrastructure initiative (新型基础设施建设; 新型基) to support merging traditional infrastructure with open-source software ([National Administration of State Secrets Protection](#), November 27, 2020), NASSP has also published a series of articles expressing security concerns. Reports highlight an alarming increase in the number of vulnerabilities, including high-risk common vulnerabilities and exposures (CVEs) found in widely used components like Apache Tomcat and OpenSSL ([NASSP](#), November 27, 2020). Integrating these without adequate screening could pose risks across entire interconnected systems.

The lack of a robust governance framework exacerbates the challenges of managing vulnerabilities. Many organizations in the PRC operate without an understanding of the components their systems use, often leading to security lapses. In response, experts advocate for the establishment of strict protocols, encompassing the entire lifecycle of software from development to deployment. This includes rigorous security audits, the adoption of security-centric development practices, and continuous monitoring for vulnerabilities ([NASSP](#), November 14, 2023). Risks are often compounded due to prevalent outsourcing of application development. External development partners might not always adhere to stringent security practices. Here, NASSP recommends meticulous vendor selection, regular security training, and the integration of security at every stage of application development ([NASSP](#), November 14, 2023).

PRC experts suggest a dual approach to effectively mitigating risks. First, by enhancing security protocols within organizations by educating and training developers and security teams on best practices. Second, through regulatory measures that enforce strict compliance to security standards across industry. Additionally, they recommend the development of a national vulnerability database and real-time threat intelligence sharing mechanisms ([NASSP](#), November 27, 2020). If these measures are adopted, the PRC will be the first country in the world to take action to secure the implementation of open-source technologies.

### **Conclusion**

The CCP's decisions to deepen its involvement in the OpenAtom Foundation and support the development of OpenHarmony and other open-source based software raises questions about the genuine independence and neutrality of such open-source endeavors. State oversight of these initiatives suggests that while open-source technology is promoted for its collaborative and innovative potential, it can also serve as an instrument for furthering national strategies which are ultimately antithetical to the ethos of open collaboration that the open-source community espouses.

The PRC's ambitions for open-source technology align innovation with state interests. The PRC is not only developing open-source technologies to bolster its technological independence but also to exploit the nature

of open-source technologies, strengthen its military industrial complex, and contain security risks. It is also positioning itself as a leader in the open-source landscape, as other countries have yet to develop equivalent ecosystems and policies. This strategic depth ensures that PRC remains at the forefront of developing such a crucial piece of emerging technologies on the global stage.

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## **Notes**

[1] RISC-V is an open-source Instruction Set Architecture (ISA) that can be deployed in hardware and software systems. It provides an alternative to the industry’s dominant proprietary ISAs—those designed by Intel and ARM Holdings. These firms are subject to foreign intellectual property constraints and geopolitical risks, which makes RISC-V attractive for the PRC.

[2] Li Jing-Ze; Fan Cheng-Yu;Ouyang Di, “Research on UAV Display Control Application Based on OpenHarmony3.2 Release”, *Development & Innovation of Machinery & Electrical Products*, China Ordnance Equipment Group Automation Institute, Issue 6, 2023; Li Jing-Ze; Li Long-Jie; Zeng Yi, “OpenHarmonyOS-based UAV Terminal Application”, *Development & Innovation of Machinery & Electrical Products*, China Ordnance Equipment Group Automation Institute, Issue 2, 2023

**Peng Liyuan Rises Up the Ranks: Implications for Xi's Despotic Rule**

*by Willy Wo-Lap Lam*



Image circulating online of Peng Liyuan in military uniform. (Source: Screenshot from [Youtube.com/陳破空 縱論天下](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...))

**Executive Summary:**

- Recent behavior by General Secretary Xi Jinping suggests a contradiction in his approach to leadership. While he has sacked protégés, suggesting a reckoning with past personnel decisions, he continues to prioritize personal connections and loyalty over competence. This centralization of power is exemplified by the promotion of his wife, Peng Liyuan, to a senior position in the CMC's opaque Cadre Assessment Committee.
- The rise of the Fujian Faction in recent years, with Cai Qi as the main beneficiary, illustrates the shifting factional landscape. Cai, a close associate of Xi, has gained significant control over state security and party building.
- The "Xi Family Army," which includes loyal acolytes at the top of the military, is experiencing cracks. Notable figures like Lieutenant General Zhong Shaojun have been removed quietly from their positions, alongside more high-profile sackings of protégés.
- Peng's increasing public profile and potential elevation within the military hierarchy has invites comparisons to Mao Zedong's reliance on his fourth wife, Jiang Qing, during the Cultural Revolution.

Recent behavior from Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) indicates a contradiction. On the one hand, sackings of protégés suggests a reckoning with the failure of his previous personnel selection. On the other, his solutions appear to double down on prioritizing personal connections and loyalty over competence. One recent development underscores levels of personalization and centralization of power within the People's Republic of China (PRC) that have not been seen since Mao Zedong. Namely, the promotion of Xi's wife, the world-renowned PLA singer Peng Liyuan (彭丽媛), who has the ranking of major-general, to the position of a senior staff in the hitherto unknown Central Military Commission's Cadre Assessment Committee (中央军委干部考评委员会) ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), May 13; [Lianhe Zaobao](#) [Singapore], May 5). Xi seems to have further consolidated power by calling the much-delayed Third Plenum of the CCP Central Committee for July. Doubts prevail, however, about the paramount leader's grip over the upper echelons of the Party-state apparatus.

### **Xi's Uncertain Control**

Xi Jinping has eroded norms and distorted the distribution of power throughout his decade-long rule of the PRC. He has relegated the State Council to a mere policy-executive organ under the direct control of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), reducing its capacity for designing policy. Meanwhile, the two PBSC members usually in charge of economic and financial policymaking—Premier Li Qiang (李强) and Executive Vice-Premier Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥)—have also been relatively sidelined ([Radio Free Asia](#), March 19; [VOA Chinese](#), January 1). Li is nominally ranked second in the Politburo pecking order and, along with Ding, is seen as a personal favorite of Xi. Nevertheless, they are seldom seen with the supreme leader and do not seem to have been given executive power over important economics-related portfolios.

In factional terms, there has been a power shift. The so-called Zhejiang Faction—a reference to officials who worked with Xi when he was party chief of the coastal province from 2002 to 2007—was formerly in the ascendancy. Now the Fujian Faction—those officials with whom the supreme leader built his career and reputation from 1985 to 2002 in the coastal province opposite Taiwan—has more clout. The biggest beneficiary of this change has been the fifth-ranked PBSC member, Cai Qi (蔡奇), who is head of the CCP Secretariat and Director of the Central Committee General Office. Cai had worked with Xi in both Fujian and Zhejiang. He is currently in charge of state security, but also of “party building,” a code word for vetting officials by assessing their loyalty to the top leader. The 68 year-old Cai even issues occasional orders on economic policy. He was the only PBSC member accompanying Xi on the latter's visit to the United States last November, his just-completed European tour, and his welcoming ceremony for President Vladimir Putin on May 16 ([Xinhua](#), May 16; [VOA Chinese](#), April 12; [Bloomberg](#), January 10).

### **Military Machinations**

Xi's apparent problems with the military's top brass also illustrate cracks in the regime. Leaders ranging from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping were able to hang on to power through ironclad control of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Since Xi consolidated power after his first term as chief of the Party and the state



(2012–2017), for the most part the commander-in-chief has been able to install protégés in top-echelon posts of all PLA divisions. Xi has also been able to exploit the large-scale restructuring of the command-and-control apparatus in 2015–2016 to further fill upper PLA ranks with loyalists ([BBC](#), July 27, 2016; [Radio French International](#), January 7, 2016).

The so-called “Xi Family Army (习家军)” is now beset with problems, however. The first sign of growing problems for this group (the term is a reference to the loyalty of the supreme leader’s handpicked generals) arose last August with the mysterious disappearance of then defense minister General Li Shangfu (李尚福) and the near- simultaneous absence from PLA functions of Li’s predecessor General Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) ([Radio French International](#), January 24; [Radio Free Asia](#), December 13, 2023). At least 20 generals and senior cadres working for the Rocket Forces and departments in charge of equipment and procurement have also been detained on corruption charges ([Radio French International](#), October 5, 2023; [Voice of America](#), August 1, 2023). This personnel overhaul was possibly a contributing factor for the CMC’s recent decision to replace the Strategic Support Force with the Information Support Force (see *China Brief*, [April 26](#), [April 26](#)).

According to three sources who hold the ranks of vice-head of department or above in PLA-related units, another unexpected personnel move this year has been the downfall of Lieutenant General Zhong Shaojun (钟绍军). The 56-year-old former secretary and speechwriter for Xi started working for the supreme leader when the latter was party secretary of Zhejiang. While he had had no military experience, Zhong was catapulted to being one of the commander-in-chief’s most trusted defense-related aides soon after Xi’s ascendance to the top in 2012, rising to become the Director of the Office of the CMC Chairman. Zhong’s removal has occurred noiselessly, with no mention in official media. The sources cited speculation that Xi had pinned part of the blame for the large number of recent sackings of military officials on Zhong. It remains unclear what has happened to Zhong, or where he is now.

Xi’s removals of protégés and trusted military personnel suggest that he is concerned about his own security, as well as that of the regime. After all, the PLA is the bulwark of the Party-state’s security, even more so than the quasi-military People’s Armed Police, the regular police, and the state-security personnel. It is the main defender against both internal and external challenges to socio-political stability. At the height of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, Mao Zedong turned to the army to restore order. Deng Xiaoping later mobilized PLA army soldiers to put down the student movement in mid-1989. Moreover, responsibility for the “liberation” of Taiwan, the one achievement that Xi counts on to justify his claim as the Mao of the 21st Century and the CCP’s greatest leader, falls to the PLA ([Penn Global](#), May 8; [Media.defense.gov](#), April 24, 2023). Xi cannot afford to see disloyalty among the top brass or a diminution of the fighting power of the military forces. This is ever more urgent as newer combat domains such as space and cyberspace come into strategic focus. However, by sacking his protégés, Xi has dented his authority and has fallen into the proverbial position of “seeing an enemy behind every tree and every stalk of grass.”

## The Rise of Peng Liyuan

A degree of paranoia would be understandable, given the apparent lack of fidelity within the “Xi Family Army (习家军).” This has perhaps led to the appointment of his wife, Peng Liyuan, to a senior staff position in the hitherto unknown CMC’s Cadre Assessment Committee (中央军委干部考评委员会). The Cadre Assessment Committee is believed to have been established after the end of the pandemic in late 2022. This also reflects Xi’s overall distrust of the top brass. Until the major structural reforms to the PLA in 2015–2016, vetting of the fealty of cadres was done by the General Political Department. Following the reorganization of the top CMC units, disciplinary and loyalty issues have at least theoretically been handled by the newly created Political Work Department.

Until early 2024, PLA artist and singer Peng had kept a low profile, much like the wives of previous leaders Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. This year, however, she has started making regular appearances in official media. Having lived in Beijing since her marriage to Xi in 1987, Peng has formed close working relationships with senior Shanghai Gang leaders such as former vice-president Zeng Qinghong (曾庆红) and his young brother Zeng Qinghuai (曾庆淮), who was an active player in the capital’s cultural scene. [1] It is believed that Peng played a pivotal role in introducing Xi to senior Shanghai Gang leaders, including former president Jiang. There has been no official confirmation that the 62 year-old Peng, who has the ranking of major-general, has been elevated to the rank of lieutenant-general. However, it is almost certain that she is now in charge of vetting the loyalty of up-and-coming generals in the forces. There is also speculation that Peng will be inducted into the politburo at the upcoming Third Plenum. The rise of Peng has invited unflattering comparisons to Mao’s dependence on his fourth wife, Jiang Qing, to launch a series of political vendettas during the 1960s and 1970s ([Radio Free Asia](#), March 28; [VOA Chinese](#), March 8).

Crucial questions concern Xi’s capacity to exert unchallenged authority over the PLA and whether he is receiving the best counsel on defense issues. This has become critical as the military and geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific Region deteriorates by the day. Xi is understood to be committed to “liberating” Taiwan during his tenure in power. Given the likelihood that Xi will win a further five-year term as party general secretary and commander-in-chief at the 23rd Party Congress in 2027, a decision on ways and means to “unify” Taiwan seems likely before his last five-year term ends in 2032 ([Yahoo News/TVBS](#), March 15; [BBC](#), September 29, 2022). Xi’s aspirations are currently undermined by concerns about the capabilities of the PLA’s military hardware. Many advanced items in the PLA’s arsenal are based on Russian designs, yet Russian armaments have received some criticism during its invasion of Ukraine ([ASPI](#), December 1, 2023; [Economic Times](#), September 13, 2023). Meanwhile, Indo-Pacific allies of the United States such as Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia are enhancing their defense ties with Washington even as each country is boosting defense spending with a view to “containing” the PRC.

## Conclusion

During the upcoming Third Plenum, the propriety of Xi's military appointments—including the ascendancy of his wife—could be discussed in private. In public, Xi is yet to reveal the reasons behind the sacking of top-level generals and protégés. The plenary session will doubtless issue a communiqué stressing loyalty to policies initiated under the guidance of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era.” The wisdom and competence of the commander-in-chief could be questioned, however. This will likely not come in the form of open outbursts of dissent, but through some form of behind-the-scenes maneuvers of the Central Committee's 205 full members and 171 alternate members.

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## Notes

[1] Guo X. The “Core” Leader and Elite Politics in Practice. In: *The Politics of the Core Leader in China: Culture, Institution, Legitimacy, and Power*. Cambridge University Press; 2019: 329-387.

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/politics-of-the-core-leader-in-china/core-leader-and-elite-politics-in-practice/965F87ED0CF5B7587578D4830838BF9E>

**Multipolar Mirage: The PRC's Pivot to Europe**

*by John S. Van Oudenaren*



Cup and saucer sent as a gift from the Qing emperor Qianlong (乾隆) to the philosopher Voltaire. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- The People's Republic of China's (PRC) is looking to promote an "equal and orderly multipolar world." Part of this entails encouraging strategic autonomy for European nations and the creation of a "non-American West" which is more amenable to PRC interests. High-level diplomatic engagements with European leaders emphasize cooperation on global challenges and multilateralism, contrasting with the PRC's portrayal of the United States as an obstacle to global stability.
- In France last week, Xi appealed to French pride in their civilization and strategic autonomy as the two countries celebrated 60 years of diplomatic ties. French political elites appear receptive to this messaging, and President Macron in particular has frequently sought to engage with the PRC.
- Beijing also desires to reset strained relations one of its largest trading partners—the European Union—through meetings with the bloc's various heads of state, especially that of Germany and France. This shift is driven by the need to sustain access to critical markets and technologies amid perceived US-led efforts to suppress the PRC's development.
- European leaders, including Scholz and Macron, have shown a willingness to engage with Beijing, in part to seek assistance in ending Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This plays to the PRC's increasing desire to be seen as a mediator in global conflicts, but given the current Sino-Russian relationship, such an approach is likely misguided.

Over the past several years, the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has centered on the Global South, the primary audience for the “three global initiatives (三大全球倡议)” introduced by core leader Xi Jinping from late 2021 through early 2023 ([People's Daily](#), January 17). This year, however, much of the PRC's high-level diplomacy has focused on Europe, as Beijing seeks to maximize the willingness of Germany, France, and other European states to reset ties that have become strained over issues related to trade, human rights, and—most notably—the PRC's support for Russia throughout its war on Ukraine. Beijing's diplomatic push coincides with continued transatlantic trade tensions and growing European uncertainty over the staying power of the United States as a world leader ([GMFUS](#), September 23, 2023). Shoring up ties with Europe is essential for the PRC to sustain access to critical markets and technologies amid what Beijing views as US-led efforts to suppress its technological and economic development ([Xinhua](#), February 20, 2023). More broadly, the PRC uses these diplomatic exchanges to promote European strategic autonomy as an essential pillar of a post-American, multipolar world order.

In May, Xi made his first visit to Western Europe in five years, traveling to France before visiting Hungary and Serbia ([People.cn](#), May 6). Xi's visit, which was organized around the 60th anniversary of the establishment of official relations between the PRC and France, builds on the PRC's recent appeals to European states' sense of strategic autonomy at a moment of global and regional uncertainty. Beijing has seized on this anniversary in its recent diplomatic engagement with Paris, emphasizing the enduring relevance of Mao Zedong and Charles De Gaulle's willingness to defy Cold War bloc politics to establish relations (see [China Brief](#), December 1, 2023). The none-too-subtle message here is that while the United States remains mired in Cold War-style geopolitical machinations, Europe and the PRC can remain partners, working together to bridge the East–West divide, avert a new Cold War, address transnational challenges, and build a multipolar world.

### **Xi Promotes Engagement With France, Germany**

At a welcome banquet hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron, Xi stated that “both countries are committed to the spirit of independence” and that DeGaulle's decision to open relations with the “New China” was “not easy against the backdrop of the Cold War” ([People.cn](#), May 6). This theme fed into Xi's encouragement for France to continue following its own course as Paris once again appears to be diverging from Washington on its policy toward the PRC. At the close of the visit, Macron and his wife, Brigitte, hosted Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan (彭丽媛), for a private gathering in the Pyrenees, a location that holds deep personal significance for the French President as the birthplace of his maternal grandmother. There in the mountains, Xi played to his host's pride in France as a great civilization and cultural center of the Western world, stressing that “although the Chinese and French civilizations, one in the East and the other in the West, have different values and social systems, both are committed to inter-civilization exchanges and mutual learning” and “through dialogue and cooperation, they could make new contributions to world peace and development and human progress” ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[MFA\]](#), May 8). This messaging may

be particularly appealing to Macron at a moment when Paris has lost its traditional role as an interlocutor between Russia and the West.

Xi's European tour follows a visit by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and a high-level business delegation to Chongqing, Shanghai, and Beijing in mid-April ([China News](#), April 15). In his talks with Xi, Scholz did seek to quietly address structural issues in Europe's economic relations with the PRC, stressing the need for fair trade and reciprocity. In general, however, he came across as soft-peddalling concerns over Chinese overcapacity and reduced market access ([CCTV](#), April 17; [MERICS](#), April 18). PRC state media was quick to highlight that despite Europe's recent "de-risking" push, top executives from major German companies such as BMW, Mercedes-Benz, and Siemens were "fiercely competing" for spots on Scholz's delegation, and noted that German direct investment in the PRC hit a record high last year ([CCTV](#), April 15). During his visit, Scholz also opened the door for Beijing to play a greater role in mediating the Russia–Ukraine War.

### **PRC Pushes European Strategic Autonomy**

#### *The Quest for an "Equal and Orderly Multipolar World"*

In late December 2023, the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference called for "advancing an equal and orderly multipolar world, and universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization (倡导平等有序的多极化和普惠包容的全球化)" ([Qstheory.cn](#), January 24; see [China Brief](#), April 12). This mantra has become a leitmotif of the PRC's diplomacy in recent months. In his video remarks on the 60th anniversary of the establishment of formal PRC–France ties this January, Xi stated that "China and France will continue to contribute to safeguarding world peace and stability and responding to global challenges" to advance this vision of a multipolar and globalized world ([MFA](#), January 25).

More recently, Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) told EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell at the Munich Security Conference that both the PRC and Europe are committed to multilateralism, and expressed a desire to work together to "promote an equal and orderly multipolar world in which every country has its place" ([MFA](#), February 17). Wang invoked the same phrase at a meeting two days later with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, noting that "China views the EU as an important force in the multipolar world" ([Xinhua](#), February 20). In talks with Scholz on April 16, Xi asserted that "China and Germany have much in common on the issue of world multipolarity" ([People.cn](#), April 16). Latterly, during his talks with Macron on May 7, Xi stated that both the PRC and France must work together to prevent a "new Cold War (新冷战)" or "camp confrontation (阵营对抗)," jointly cooperating to "advance an equal and orderly shift to a multipolar world" ([Xinhua](#), May 7).

#### *The Idea of the Two Wests*

Beijing still considers Europe and its leading states, particularly France and Germany, as critical to achieving genuine multipolarity. Importantly, Europe has some but not all elements of a global power center, including several that the PRC lacks (e.g., a truly global currency). A transatlantic rupture and the emergence of

Europe as a weak but independent pole in a multipolar world would accelerate Xi's quest to reshape the world order (not least by increasing European dependence on the PRC). This translates into an official narrative that frames the "American West" as an obstacle to global stability while characterizing the broader "West," especially Europe, as a key pillar of a revised multipolar world order.

As competition between the United States and the PRC has intensified, both official and popular rhetoric in the PRC increasingly differentiates the United States and its closest allies from the West at large. A November 2022 *People's Daily* article by Wang Qianrong (王乾荣) observes that "as the world is undergoing profound changes, so are people's vocabularies, with the phrase 'American West (美西方)' becoming a buzzword" (*People's Daily*, November 4, 2022). Per the article, the term connotes a "West" that both encompasses and is bigger than the United States, while also reflecting that country's place as the dominant power in this grouping. Wang explains that the term "American West" summarizes "collusion between the United States and other Western states on the issue of China." For example, a recent Xinhua commentary states "Sinophobia (恐华症)" has flared up again in the "American West," where "national security" is used as a pretext to bar "superior Chinese products, from electric vehicles to cranes" (*Xinhuanet*, March 16).

The concept of an "American West" that relentlessly seeks to suppress the PRC grafts on to other long-running themes in PRC messaging and propaganda. These include a focus on the United States' "Cold War Mentality (冷战思维)" and Washington's penchant for building exclusive "small cliques (小圈子)" such as NATO and the G7 to sustain its "hegemony" (*The Paper*, July 17, 2023; *People's Daily*, May 13, 2023; *Guangming Daily*, August 17, 2022). In 2021, Wang Honggang (王鸿刚), Vice President and Director of the Institute for American Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, a think tank under the Ministry of State Security, claimed that while the United States appears militarily strong, it is actually weak as it must rely on organizing "small cliques" to sustain power (*People.cn*, April 12, 2021). A February 2023 report by Xinhua's in-house think tank on "US Hegemony and its Perils" castigated Washington for developing a "hegemonic playbook to stage 'color revolutions,' instigate regional disputes, and even directly launch wars under the guise of promoting democracy, freedom, and human rights" (*Xinhua*, February 20, 2023).

### *France: An Alternative Model for the West*

The counterpoint of the "American West" for the PRC are those Western countries that exercise "strategic autonomy." In practice, Beijing appraises states' "strategic autonomy" based on their relative willingness to take actions contrary to US policy. Perhaps no Western state accords with Beijing's conception of strategic autonomy as much as France, which has long prized its freedom of action vis-à-vis the United States and NATO.

Under Macron, France has been willing to play ball with Beijing. Last April, with US–China relations still frosty following the spy balloon fracas, Macron visited the PRC. During his visit, the two countries agreed to a

sweeping 51-point joint statement on “opening new prospects in bilateral relations” and “fostering momentum in China–EU relations” ([MFA](#), April 7, 2023). The statement not only calls for greater economic, technological, and environmental cooperation but also greater security engagement ([China Brief](#), April 14, 2023). In April this year, military-military engagement between France and the PRC, which has persisted despite fits and starts in US–China military diplomacy, was deepened and further institutionalized with an agreement to establish an “inter-theater cooperation and dialogue mechanism” between the PLA Southern Theater Command and the French military’s Pacific Ocean and Polynesian maritime zones ([China Military Online](#), April 26).

During Xi’s May visit, Beijing and Paris issued a Joint Statement on the Situation in the Middle East, stating that as permanent United Nations Security Council members, the two countries are “working together to find constructive solutions, based on international law, to the challenges and threats to international security and stability,” and calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza ([China Daily](#), May 7). The joint statement provides a public diplomacy boost to the PRC’s efforts to bill itself as a credible security leader in the Middle East through the Global Security Initiative and a series of proposals for addressing regional security conflicts ([China.org.cn](#), February 28; [MFA](#), September 21, 2022).

Indeed, the sense that the PRC is a partner, albeit a prickly one, still permeates much of the French elite. This was encapsulated by Minister for the Economy and Finance Bruno Le Maire’s remarks at Davos last year: “China cannot be out, China must be in. This is a difference of view that we have between the [United States] and Europe” ([WEF](#), January 20, 2023). Such sentiments were echoed again ahead of Xi’s visit to France this May, with a French official telling *Politico EU* that “We have our own policy on China which is different to the public policy of the [United States].” ([Politico EU](#), April 30).

### **Conclusion**

Early in the Trump administration, many postulated that the PRC would exploit heightened transatlantic friction, but Beijing was ill-positioned to capitalize. Intensification of US–China competition coincided with the end of the China–Europe honeymoon in the late 2010s. Europeans, who once viewed engagement with the PRC as overwhelmingly positive, began to face up to the negative elements of the PRC’s authoritarian system, including its mercantilist economic practices and extensive repressive apparatus highlighted by the mass internment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the crackdown on Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement, and the heavy-handed “zero-COVID” policy. In 2019, Macron, a general proponent of engagement, went so far as to declare an end to the era of “European naïveté” on the PRC ([Nikkei Asia](#), March 23, 2019). This shift was reflected in the EU’s revised official stance that the country was now “a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival” ([EU External Action Service](#), December 7, 2023).

A full-on transatlantic rupture did not occur during Trump’s term. In 2024, however, circumstances are fundamentally different. As the Russia–Ukraine war rages on, a Europe faced with diminished or curtailed US support may become increasingly desperate for some sort of compromise with Russia using the PRC as an intermediary. Despite supporting Russia throughout the war, the PRC might still leverage European



desperation to position itself as an “honest broker” in the conflict ([China Brief](#), March 11, 2022; [France 24](#), April 12). Some European leaders already appear to be entertaining such fancies. Scholz justified his recent visit to the PRC as an effort to achieve a “just peace” in Ukraine ([Le Monde](#), April 16). At the end of his visit, Scholz said that the PRC’s word “carries weight in Russia” and relayed that he asked Xi to influence Moscow to “end this terrible war” ([DW](#), April 16).

As they engage with Beijing, European leaders must remember that Xi’s vision of a multipolar world differs fundamentally from their own. While Europe pursues international cooperation for its own sake and to manage transnational challenges, for the PRC, the emergence of a multipolar world is something more. It is a springboard to realizing Xi’s Sino-centric vision of a “community with a shared future for mankind.”

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