



VOLUME 24 • ISSUE 13 • JUNE 21, 2024

IN THIS ISSUE:

**New China Coast Guard Regulation Buttresses PRC Aggression
in the South China Sea**

By Arran Hope.....pp. 2–6

Cognitive Domain Operations Against Vietnam Hint at Broader Ambitions

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Jackson Smith.....pp. 7–18

**PRC Influence via the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign
Countries**

By Cheryl Yu.....pp. 19–26

Taiwan in Focus at the Shangri-La Dialogue

By Ying-yu Lin & Tzu-hao Liaopp. 27–32

Georgia’s Anaklia Port and PRC Infrastructure Strategy

By Lea Thome.....pp. 33–38

**New China Coast Guard Regulation Buttresses PRC Aggression in
the South China Sea**

by Arran Hope



China Coast Guard harasses Philippine vessel on June 17. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary:

- The new “Regulation of the China Coast Guard (CCG) Organization on Enforcing Law and Order” formalizes the increasingly assertive actions taken by Chinese forces in parts of the South China Sea (SCS), empowering the CCG to detain foreign vessels and persons for up to 60 days (Art. 257) and to implement temporary maritime “warning zones” (Art. 35) for purposes such as “military use of the sea.”
- Assertive behavior by the CCG this week has led to several injuries of Philippines sailors, as the PRC continues to violate its obligations under UNCLOS while pushing the envelope on the US–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty.
- PRC assertiveness in the SCS has been on a constant upward trend for decades, but the current flashpoint with the Philippines is the most serious moment in the last decade.
- That the PRC will continue to pursue its strategy to become a “maritime great power” is reflected in its rhetoric, for example warning others that “infringement or provocation is futile.”

On June 15, a new China Coast Guard (CCG; 中国海警) regulation titled the “Regulation of the CCG Organization on Enforcing Law and Order (海警机构行政执法程序规定)” came into force, having been passed one month prior ([CCG](#), accessed June 21). Across 16 chapters and 281 articles, it builds on the 2021 CCG Law (海警法) and formalizes the increasingly assertive actions taken by Chinese forces in parts of South China Sea (SCS) since last Fall ([Xinhua](#), January 22, 2021).

Physical coercive actions by CCG vessels and crew members within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Philippines this week—waters that the PRC claims are part of its “blue national territory (蓝色国土)” signal a new high water mark in the current escalatory trajectory ([Xinhua](#), September 11, 2021). Beyond dangerous use of water cannon (which injured several Philippine mariners in March), ramming, and blocking maneuvers, other actions in the latest fracas were new. These include the first “boarding inspection” by PRC sailors, and the use of axes to puncture rigid-hulled inflatable boats that were later towed away (see [Twitter/@jaytaryela](#), June 21). At least eight Philippines sailors were injured, with one losing a thumb ([CCG](#), June 17; [USNI News](#), June 19). Despite this flurry of aggressive activity from the PRC side, questions remain about its objectives, the timing of this phase of escalation, and whether or not any recent or perhaps imminent behavior might fall under the definition of an “armed attack” under Article V of the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty ([US DoS](#), August 2, 1951.)

PRC Historic Claims Contradict International Law

PRC assertiveness in the SCS has been the norm for decades. A 2022 report that uses a novel dataset to argue that, between 1970 and 2015, “increasing Chinese assertiveness [was] a basic continuity,” noting that there were only four years in this period in which the PRC “did not engage in some form of new, increased, or expanded assertive activity.” The most recent such year was 1990 ([NBR](#), May 2022).

PRC claims are encapsulated in the “nine-dash line,” clarified in a 2009 submission to the UN in which the PRC stated that it has “indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof” ([UN](#), 2009). The nine-dash line—recently expanded to a ten-dash line in a feat of “cartographic expansionism” ([China Brief](#), October 6, 2023)—overlaps with the maritime claims of six other governments: the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. The PRC has been treating this entire expanse as its own jurisdictional waters since the 1980s ([NBR](#), May 2022).

In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at the Hague ruled against the PRC and in favor of the Philippines, finding that the PRC’s “historic rights” to the SCS were contrary to UNCLOS, of which the PRC is a signatory ([PCA Cases](#), July 12, 2016). In response, the PRC has declared the tribunal’s arbitration “illegal, null and void. It is nothing more than a piece of waste paper” ([PRC Embassy to Turkey](#), July 12, 2021). The PRC has thus continued to act in defiance of the ruling, with minimal pushback. This is in part because sovereignty claims are outside UNCLOS’s scope of jurisdiction ([CRS](#), August 21, 2023).

New Powers Enhance Scope for PRC Activity in SCS

The PRC's 2021 Coast Guard Law expanded the scope under which CCG can use weapons to include their use against foreign organizations ([MND](#), January 22, 2021). It also omitted a definition of "waters under the jurisdiction of China," though an earlier draft stated that these included undefined "other waters" ([Lawfare](#), February 16, 2021). These developments have provided the legal basis for transforming the CCG into an organization whose mission includes national defense. In terms of force structure, the CCG is under the People's Armed Police, which in turn is under the unified command of the Central Military Commission. This has led to increased collaboration with the PLA, including the transfer of retired PLA Navy ships and former PLA Navy officers to the CCG ([Japan MOD](#), accessed June 20).

The new regulation builds on the 2021 law, as well as on two criminal procedure regulations from 2023 ([MFA](#), May 15). CCG actions this week such as "forced towing (强制拖离)" that were sanctioned in the 2021 law are now supplemented with powers to detain foreign vessels and persons for up to 60 days (Art. 257), and to implement temporary maritime "warning zones (警戒区)" (Art.35) for purposes such as "military use of the sea." [3] As with the 2021 law crucial definitions remain deliberately vague. [2] This includes definitions of "waters under China's jurisdiction" as well as the scope of the use of force, which includes "other law enforcement actions (...等法律)" (Art. 2). The regulation also does not acknowledge the sovereign immunity under international law of foreign vessels operated by foreign governments. While the PRC claims these waters as its own territory, these claims are not recognized in international law. As such, this plausibly constitutes an additional and illegal extraterritorial application of PRC law.

Statements by PRC officials and state media outlets provide an additional angle on how the PRC views actions by the Philippines within what it perceives as its own "indisputable" territory. CCG spokesman Gan Yu (甘羽) has made statements affirming that the CCG will "continue to carry out rights defense and law enforcement activities in waters under China's jurisdiction" and warning that "any form of infringement or provocation is futile (任何形式的侵权挑衅都徒劳无益)" ([CCG](#), May 20; [CCG](#), June 17). He described CCG actions as taking "control measures such as warning and blocking, boarding and inspection, and forcible removal of the Filipino vessel (警告拦阻、登临检查、强制驱离等管制措施)," all of which were "reasonable, lawful, professional and standardized" ([CCG](#), June 17). State media outlet CCTV noted that the language on forcible removal ("强制驱离") was new, while also framing the Philippines' actions provocatively as a "pre-dawn invasion (凌晨侵闯)" ([CCTV News](#), June 19).

Some scholars have echoed the government's strident rhetoric. In April, Zhao Hongwei (赵宏伟), a former researcher at the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences, avowed in an article that "this summer should be the time for action (行动时机, 应该选在今夏)" in the SCS ([Wechat/Haiwai Kan Shijie](#), April 15). He envisions overcoming the Philippines' claims to allow an "East Asian Community of Shared Destiny" to emerge. Zhao's views have been characterized as "provocative" and "closer to the extremes," but the CCG's actions since penning his article suggest that parts of the military command structure have

similar views ([Sinification](#), June 1). Other comments, such as journalists praising Coast Guard crew shouting across the water “this is China. Go back to the Philippines,” or social media comments calling for the use of force, also suggest that these views are fairly common ([Twitter/XH_Lee23](#), June 20).

Zhao’s views also echo longstanding ambitions for the PRC’s maritime strategy. The PRC has long desired to become a “maritime great power (MGP; 海洋强国).” In 2003 for instance, Hu Jintao led a politburo study session that found that maritime power had historically been key to the rise of great powers. He subsequently inserted language about MGP in the Work Report to the 18th Party Congress in 2012. MGP has an expansive definition, a core component of which is the PRC’s maritime strategic interests. These include national sovereignty, security, and development ([Naval War College Review](#), Spring 2018; [Qiushi](#), August 31, 2017). Xi has built on his predecessor’s foundations, consistently stating that maritime strategy is integral to broader strategic goals such as achieving national rejuvenation by 2049 (see for example, [NDRC](#), March 7) .

PRC Actions Draw Condemnation, Limited Response

The drama of the last week may not be unprecedented in the SCS, but it has exceeded conduct seen in recent years in terms of severity. It is unclear what has prompted these developments. More immediately, escalation this week may be in response to Manila’s submission to the UN to register its extended continental shelf (ECS) in the Western Palawan region in the West Philippine Sea, which the PRC foreign ministry has criticized ([PNA](#), June 15; [Xinhua](#), June 16). Given the uptick in activity since the 2021 law entered into force and the continual ratcheting up of pressure over the last five decades, recent assertiveness should be seen as the increasingly forceful execution of long-standing policy.

The Philippines has been steadfast in its public statements. The Philippines’ Department of foreign Affairs has criticized the PRC for “blatant escalation of tensions” ([DFA](#), May 26). Three years ago, President Duterte stated that “no amount of willful disregard by any country, however big and powerful, can diminish the arbitral award’s importance” ([PNA](#), September 22, 2021). His successor, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Romualdez Marcos Jr., more recently called out the PRC for “illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive actions” that “continue to violate [the Philippines’] sovereign rights and jurisdictions” ([IISS](#), May 31). This week, General Romeo Brawner Jr, the chief of staff of the Philippines armed forces, likened PRC behavior to “piracy” ([USNI News](#), June 19). The CCG’s actions do not fit international legal definitions of piracy, as they are acting under the command of a state ([UN](#), accessed June 20). The United States has also condemned the PRC for its destabilizing actions, though so far it has stopped short of providing material assistance to its treaty ally.

Conclusion

There have been several instances in which, following international agreements and rulings, the PRC has decreased its assertiveness in the SCS. This happened following the UNCLOS ruling in 2016, when Philippine vessels were able to fish in Scarborough Shoal without interference for the first time since

2012. It also occurred following the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), when military activity from the PRC became notably less common between 2004 and 2008 ([NBR](#), May 2022). In each case however, there has been only temporary reprieve to any largesse. PRC assertiveness has in effect operated as a one-way ratchet for decades, with each new attempt to push the boundaries forming the basis for subsequent expansion. This suggests that it will continue to find ways to escalate and enforce its maritime claims unless Party leaders perceive significant reasons not to pursue its current longstanding strategic objectives. PRC understanding of power in the SCS has changed little from the framing of former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who stated at the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010 that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact.”

Arran Hope is the editor of China Brief.

Notes

[1] While this week may have seen the first instance of towing, it should be noted that in 2016 a US Navy unmanned buoyancy glider was taken by PLA forces in international waters ([USNI](#), December 16, 2016).

[2] This is the case for many other PRC laws of concern. For instance, see [China Brief](#), March 1.

Cognitive Domain Operations Against Vietnam Hint at Broader Ambitions

by Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Jackson Smith



An image depicting cognitive domain operations against Vietnam. (Source: AI-generated)

Executive Summary:

- Translation forms a crucial part of People’s Liberation Army (PLA)-directed research. This is done to support influence operations, enhance cooperation with the Russian military, and even understand US policy discussions on social media.
- Recent research from institutions such as the PLA Strategic Support Force’s (PLASSF) Information Engineering University indicates that the PLA can conduct cognitive domain operations against not just Taiwan or the United States, but almost anywhere—including authoritarian states such as Vietnam.
- The PLA has spent at least five years building corpora of foreign language texts to train machine translation tools, though the scarcity of quality resources has been an issue in creating useful tools. The extent to which LLMs will become an additional tool in this research is unclear.
- At least some PLA machine translation efforts rely on foreign open-source tools, such as Google Translate and DeepL.

Editor's note: the PLA Strategic Support Force dissolved after this article was drafted. The piece retains a PLASSF-centric analysis, though does not diminish the utility of the content.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is updating and expanding its long-standing efforts to target countries with cyber-enabled influence operations (IO). It is already planning for IO against Vietnam, while similar efforts are likely underway against Burma, India, and others. Vietnam provides a useful case study as it demonstrates that Chinese efforts go beyond what is most often captured in the headlines and because the PLA rarely states so blatantly that it is employing specific operational concepts against specific adversaries.

Cognitive domain operations (CDO; 认知域作战) is the new primary operational concept for Chinese military IO. It serves as a technologically-driven update to the more widely known “Three Warfares (三战)” — psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare (see [China Brief](#), September 8, 2023). [1] The US Department of Defense (DoD) defines CDO as “combin[ing] psychological warfare with cyber operations to shape adversary behavior and decision making,” with the assessed intention to “use CDO as an asymmetric capability to deter US or third-party entry into a future conflict, or as an offensive capability to shape perceptions or polarize a society” ([DOD](#), October 19, 2023). DoD further explains that the PLA is interested in leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies such as big data and brain science for CDO, as the PLA “perceives that these technologies will lead to profound changes in the ability to subvert human cognition” (see also, RAND; [June 1, 2023](#); [September 7, 2023](#), [February 1](#)).

PLA IO Planning Against Vietnam

Direct evidence of PLA planning for IO against Vietnam comes in the form of a 2022 master's thesis from the PLA Strategic Support Force's (PLASSF) Information Engineering University (IEU; 战略支援部队信息工程大学) that translates part of a Vietnamese military text. [2] The source text is a 2020 book titled “Characteristics of Vietnamese Military Culture (越南军事文化本色),” published by the Vietnam Institute for Military Social Sciences and Humanities and edited by a Vietnamese senior colonel. [3] As the thesis explains, the book is “highly concise and authoritative, reflecting the mainstream thinking of the Vietnamese military and academia on military culture, and has high reference value.”

The purpose of the translation is to “provide research as a basis to better conduct cognitive domain operations against Vietnam (更好地开展对越认知域作战)” in the context of geopolitical competition in the “great power game (大国博弈).” The author adds that she wanted to “enable domestic academic circles to better understand Vietnam's views and positions, and to provide reference for our external propaganda work, cognitive domain operations, etc.” Such explicit linkage between graduate student research supporting PLA CDO efforts raises the possibility that other similar work could also support IOs in a more structured arrangement.

This master's thesis is unusually authoritative and likely provides a rare glimpse into Chinese military planning and activities. The author's school, IEU, falls under the PLASSF Network Systems Department

(NSD) (now the Cyberspace Force [网络空间部队] following the April 2024 elimination of the PLASSF). [4] The author was previously at the PLA's University of Foreign Languages (外国语学院) in Luoyang, which is responsible for training the PLA's foreign language professionals. These are institutions one would expect to provide linguistic support to foreign language IOs, such as CDOs. Interestingly, the author offers a preemptive disclaimer, writing that the translation does not represent her own views and that "the translator does not agree with what it says about China." This suggests that the PLA can be sensitive about what can be considered politically acceptable, even within the bounds of academic translation.

Vietnam was the adversary in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) last major conflict (1979) and, until the 2020 border clash with India, its last major use of force (in 1988 over Johnson South Reef). Nevertheless, Western research has paid less attention to PLA operational planning against Vietnam than to other regional contingencies—a 2015 RAND conference volume on PLA contingency planning does not address Vietnam, for instance. [5] This is despite publicly available research that suggests PLA planning against Vietnam, such as a research effort over 2016-2017 by Southern TC PLAAF researchers on aerial power projection for maritime operations for what is clearly a South China Sea (SCS) contingency. [6]

The history of IO conducted by the PRC against Vietnam, however, has been well documented by foreign researchers. Recent reports have documented PRC efforts to shape Vietnam's information environment and gray-zone coercion against regional countries, including in the information domain ([CNA](#), September 2020; [RAND](#), March 30, 2022). Moreover, Ryan Martinson has shown that PLA Navy wargaming for Vietnam includes planning for psychological warfare. [7]

Researchers at Base 311 under the PLASSF NSD (now the Cyberspace Force; CSF)—the PLA's only known unit for foreign IOs—have also written on Vietnam over the years, suggesting Hanoi is a focus of its efforts. 2014 saw an uptick of research when the PRC and Vietnam had a low-level crisis over Beijing moving its HY981 oil rig into disputed waters in the SCS. Base 311 researchers that year documented Vietnamese views of the PRC and Vietnamese propaganda about the SCS. [8]

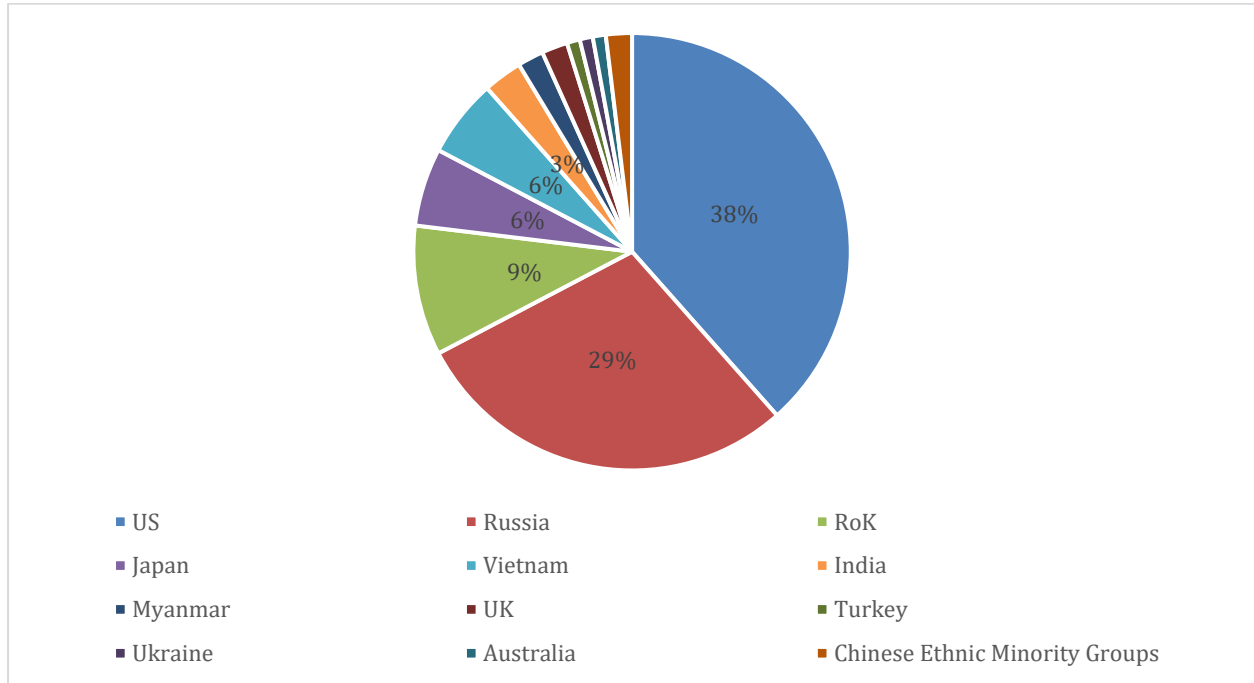
Broader Translation Efforts Suggest Grander Ambitions

Additional PLASSF IEU theses suggest a specific PLA effort since at least 2019 to train machine translation tools based on acquiring foreign language texts. This could be intended to support AI-driven CDO against other countries. [9] PLASSF IEU produces many master's theses and PhD dissertations that involve some translation, primarily focused on the United States, Russia, and South Korea. The breadth of translations that are explicitly focused on supporting machine translation, however, suggests the PLASSF may be undertaking a broader effort to build up corpora to support AI-driven CDO. [10]

PLA analysts have noted the role of machine translation and building corpora in supporting PLA IO. A 2021 article by two NUDT researchers as part of a research grant on "national defense language capabilities (国防语言能力)" argued that the PRC "can rely on 'cloud' technology to build a comprehensive service platform for the 'critical languages' of our military's public opinion struggle," in part involving machine

translation, to “solve the problems faced by our military’s news and communication departments at all levels” ([Military Correspondent](#), May, 2021). Similarly, a 2023 article by PLASSF IEU Luoyang campus researchers highlighted the role of machine translation in IO, namely fueling the “Great Translation Movement” as a targeted Western IO against the PRC ([Military Correspondent](#), January, 2023). Building corpora is also a widely recognized enabler of PLA IO. One 2017 article argued, “We can rely on currently relatively mature corpus technology, data mining technology, open source intelligence information technology, and subliminal information technology” ([Military Correspondent](#), March, 2021; [China Military Online](#), October 21, 2020). [11] This PLA effort dates to at least 2005 with an “Intelligent English-Chinese Machine Translation System (英汉智能型机器翻译系统).” [12]

Figure 1: Information Engineering University Translation Theses and Dissertations by Target Country (2001-2022)



Source: Authors’ research on PLASSF IEU publications.

A 2020 PLASSF IEU master’s thesis explains that a large corpus is important for neural machine translation (NMT). [13] Ideally, there would be a “large number of parallel corpora,” making it preferable to use a “neural network machine translation model based on reinforcement learning on supervised algorithms.” However, if a smaller corpus available—“low resource conditions”—then the author calls for using “transfer learning technology to prevent neural networks from overfitting during training and improve the generalization ability.” Lastly, if the “parallel corpus is extremely scarce but sufficient in a monolingual corpus,” the last resort is to use “unsupervised machine translation technology,” which the author leaves as a topic of future research.

The PLA has apparently lacked sufficient corpora to target many of these countries in the past few years. Theses on India, Russia, and the United States lament having to rely on transfer learning “in order to solve the low resource (or language variants) problem,” [14] note that Russian-Chinese translation “is still in the

experimental stage,” [15] and affirm that “quantity and quality of corpora are the basic conditions for training neural network machine translation models.” [16] A 2021 thesis focused on supporting machine translation of Japanese military texts acknowledges that some human involvement is still necessary for superior translation. [17] It suggests using “Machine Translation + Post-Editing,” as machine translation outputs “cannot be put into use directly.” The thesis’ stated aim is to “understand the current situation of research on Japan’s military strategy so as to take corresponding countermeasures.”

A key question in the era of generative AI is whether the PLA will embrace LLMs for this type of translation work or remain focused on NMT, both of which have strengths and weaknesses. If LLMs are being embraced, it is possible that novel tools have been able to partially resolve some of these issues.

Other Dissertations Focus Further Afield

The role of these translation-focused PLASSF IEU theses in supporting IO is given further credence by a 2022 MA thesis focusing on Burmese. [18] The thesis links its purposes to supporting propaganda, specifically writing that “Burmese foreign language translation is ... a key measure for China to ‘build’ a good image in Myanmar.” The thesis frames this in broad terms, noting that “discourse is power” and that the PRC must “build a set of external discourse systems (对外话语体系) that have distinctive Chinese characteristics and can be understood and accepted by the international community.” A 2019 thesis, meanwhile, built an “Indian English-Chinese neural translation system” and focused on Indian social media discourse. [19] While this thesis does not obviously frame its efforts in support of IOs, social media is a known focus of PLA CDO efforts ([DOD](#), October 19, 2023; [China Brief](#), April 12, 2021; [RAND](#), September 7, 2023).

Not all PLA translations serve IO, however. A 2022 thesis instead explains it is supporting growing PRC-Russia military cooperation, [20] while a PhD thesis from that year apparently supports of enhanced bilateral military cooperation with Türkiye—an important strategic Belt and Road Initiative partner. [21] Both theses discuss the scarcity of data and the need to reduce communication barriers to facilitate cooperation, including overcoming a shortage of human professional translation staff currently in the PLA. In the latter thesis, the author also makes a vague reference to “fulfilling military mission requirements (满足未来军事任务需),” though this is left unexplained.

Other PLASSF IEU work focuses on understanding US policy conversations, specifically on social media. One 2022 master’s thesis scraped data from the Twitter accounts of 30 Biden administration senior officials, including President Biden and at least 15 cabinet members, as well as the official accounts of over 30 US government organizations (e.g., CIA, NRO, NIC, etc.). [22] The researchers explained their methodology as “tagging the linguistic features of social networks in the military-political domain, constructing a word segmentation model based on the BPE algorithm, splicing and aligning the linguistic features of English and Chinese training data at the encoding and decoding ends, and incorporating the features into fine-tuned neural network structures based on mBart pre-trained model and transformer neural network structures.”

The value of the analysis, the thesis explains, is that “a large amount of valuable information can be extracted from the political opinions, policies, and mission deployments released by military and political figures and institutions through social networks, thereby obtaining open-source intelligence.” It also notes that, “in the context of big data, the traditional manual translation model can no longer meet the requirements for high-quality and on-demand translation of data in the military-political domain in social networks.” The thesis frames itself in the context of “social media warfare (社交媒体战),” which has “opened up a new dimension of warfare in the information age, and social networks have become a battlefield of public opinion where countries compete fiercely.”

Insights

This batch of PLASSF IEU dissertations and theses reveals several insights. First, PLA CDO efforts go beyond merely targeting Taiwan and the United States and can likely target anyone. Earlier evidence comes from Base 311 research on other countries, such as the Philippines and Japan. [23] If Beijing is using resources to target Vietnam, there is a good chance Beijing is also targeting US allies and partners in Asia. A recent Microsoft report found that just one PRC IO actor—Spamouflage—produced content in 58 languages targeting a wide range of countries, including Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, just within the past year ([Microsoft](#), April 4).

Multiple Chinese military instructional texts on psychological warfare highlight the importance of targeting adversary alliances. [24] Since at least 2004, PLA texts have acknowledged the PRC’s intention of targeting adversary alliances in wartime as part of the PLA’s Three Warfares strategy. For example, a 2014 PLA National Defense University textbook notably calls for “Disintegrating (瓦解) enemy military alliance (车事同盟) relations.” As modern wars usually rely on certain military alliances and it is difficult for enemy military alliances to achieve complete coordination of interests, the textbook argues, “unbalancing the levers of interests among allies or alliance forces (联盟力量) has become an important means of weakening their overall combat potential.” [25] For a real-world example, Japan has long been worried about Chinese IO efforts targeting Okinawa to support local pro-independence sentiment and eject US forces based there ([CSIS](#), July 23, 2020).

Second, these CDO efforts target both democratic and authoritarian countries. This means that efforts to counter malign influence are germane to all states concerned by the PRC’s rise. So far, the United States and European countries have focused their counter-disinformation outreach almost exclusively on other global democracies. This overlooks authoritarian swing states that are also important to great power competition. Indeed, the thesis’ acknowledgement that CDO against Vietnam was in the context of great power competition, clearly against the United States, highlights the PRC’s big picture view of its IO efforts.

Third, at least some PLA machine translation efforts rely on foreign open-source tools, such as Google Translate and DeepL. [26] While this is very difficult, if not impossible, to restrict in practice, it highlights the risk of open-source tools as LLMs become more powerful. Overall, this reaffirms the understanding that CDO

is the PLA's preferred operational concept for IOs and can have a global reach to support the PRC's growing ambitions.

Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga is a Senior Policy Researcher at the RAND Corporation and a former editor of China Brief.

Jackson Smith is a research assistant at the RAND Corporation, where he focuses on Indo-Pacific security issues including Chinese IO and geopolitical strategic competition#

Notes

[1] For some PLA texts, see: Ye Zheng [叶征], ed., *Lectures on the Science of Information Operations* [信息作战学教程], Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013; Wu Jieming [吴杰明] and Liu Zhifu [刘志富], *An Introduction to Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare* [舆论战心理战法律战概论], Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2014.

[2] Yu Caixian [余彩仙], "Vietnamese-Chinese Translation Report Based on Vinay & Darbelnet's Translation Model—A Case Study of Characteristics of Vietnamese Military Culture (Excerpts)" ["基于维奈和达贝尔内模式的越汉翻译实践报告"], master's thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022.

[3] We were unable to locate the original book in Vietnamese, but the PLASSF IEU thesis gives the book as Duong Quoc Dung [杨国勇], ed., *Characteristics of Vietnamese Military Culture* [越南军事文化本色], Vietnam People's Army Publishing House [越南人民军队出版社], 2020.

[4] The school merged with IEU in 2017 as part of the educational component of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's broader military reforms, though it was transferred to NUDT's School of International Relations in 2023. For more on Luoyang's support to PLASSF NSD operations, see: Joe McReynolds and LeighAnn Luce, "China's Human Capital Ecosystem For Network Warfare," in Roy Kamphausen, ed., *The People of the PLA 2.0*, pp. 327-371. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/944/>.

See also: Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions*, Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, June 2020.

https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic_Institutions.pdf

[5] Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, eds., *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, National Defense University Press, 2015.

<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/Books/PLA-contingency/PLA-Contingency-Planning-China.pdf>.

[6] For the most explicit discussion, see: Zhu Guang [朱光], Wang Hui [王辉], Liu Yonghua [刘永华], Zhao Wang [赵旺], “Joint Projection Support of Maritime Military Operation” [“海上方向军事行动联合投送保障研究”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报] 19:2, February 2017, pp. 6-9. See also: Zhu Guang [朱光] and Liu Yonghua [刘永华], “Construction of Strategic Projection Capability for Dealing with Major Unexpected Incidents” [“应对重大突发事件的战略投送能力建设”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报] 18:1, January 2016, pp. 1-5; Zhu Guang [朱光], Zeng Wangcheng [曾王成], Wang Hui [王辉], and Liu Yonghua [刘永华], “Constructing Motorized Transportation Support Capability of Our Air Force” [“空军部队摩托化机动运输保障能力的建设”], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报] 18:8, August 2016, pp. 19-22. For other research by PLA Guangzhou Military Region (now Southern TC) that was probably thinking about South China Sea disputes, see: Su Xuejun [苏学军] and Wu Hongqiang [吴宏强], “Legal protection of the military’s protection of national border rights and interests” [“军队维护国家边防权益的法律保障”], *Journal of Xi’an Politics Institute* [西安政治学院学报] 24:3, June 2011, pp. 77-81.

[7] Ryan D. Martinson, “Counter-intervention in Chinese naval strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, March 2020, pp. 1-23: “A 2016 PLA Navy Command College scenario began with red’s (i.e., China’s) deployment of oil/gas drilling equipment in disputed waters, resulting in a confrontation with ‘blue’ (probably Vietnam) that spiraled out of control. Red quickly seized the upper hand. It conducted strikes on blue’s military bases and airports. The game introduced a ‘green’ side (i.e., the United States). The blue side used a variety of measures to persuade green to provide support. Red responded by using propaganda, psychological attacks, and military saber rattling to communicate its ‘power and determination’ [to] respond if green intervened. Red’s effort at deterrence ultimately failed, as green responded by sending two carrier strike groups to the area on the pretext of ensuring freedom of navigation. Green also sent a surface action group to menace red’s sea lines of communication.”

[8] Wei Qiang [韦强], “Strategic Interactions between Japan and Vietnam on the South China Sea Issue” [“日本与越南在南海问题上的战略互动”], *International Study Reference* [国际研究参考], January 2014; Wei Qiang [韦强], “Vietnam’s Public Opinion Propaganda Strategy on the South China Sea Issue” [“越南在南海问题上的舆论宣传策略”], *International Study Reference* [国际研究参考], April 2014; Wei Qiang [韦强] and Mou Shan [牟珊], “Discussion and Analysis of the Vietnamese Populace’s Attitudes Toward China” [“越南民众对华心态评析”], *International Study Reference* [国际研究参考], December 2014. Wei lists his affiliation as the Huaqiao Broadcasting Company, which is a known Base 311 front company. For more on this, see: Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, *The People’s Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, October 2013; and Paul Charon and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, *Chinese IOs: A Machiavellian Moment*,

Institute for Strategic Research at the Military School, October 2021. For additional Base 311 research on Vietnam, see: Zeng Tianyi [曾添翼] and Xie Jiewei [谢捷维], "image construction strategies of Luoyang [City] in Vietnam's mainstream online media and its enlightenment" ["越南主流网络媒体的洛阳形象建构策略及其启示"], *Journal of Luoyang Normal University* [洛阳师范学院学报], December 2019.

[9] There was an earlier round of PLASSF IEU interest in machine translation in the mid-2000s. See: Li Jian [李剑], "Sentence pattern conversion and translation generation in English-Chinese machine translation" ["英汉机器翻译中的句型转换和译文生成"], master's thesis for PLA Information Engineering University [解放军信息工程大学], 2005; Ma Fang [马芳], "Research on English Clause Identification for Machine Translation System" ["机器翻译系统中英语从句的识别研究"], master's thesis for PLA Information Engineering University [解放军信息工程大学], 2006; Guo Yonghui [郭永辉] "Research on Key Technologies of English-Chinese Machine Translation System" ["英汉机器翻译系统关键技术研究"], PhD dissertation for PLA Information Engineering University [解放军信息工程大学], 2006.

[10] For example, some other recent PLA MA thesis translations include: Ukrainian research on cognitive warfare: He Hongjiang [何泓江], "Cognitive Warfare in Social Media, Popular Culture and Mass Communication' (Excerpt) Translation Practice Report" [《社交媒体、大众文化和大众传播中的认知战》(节选) 翻译实践报告], master's thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022; Russian research on social media and IOs: Lai Mingwu [赖明武], "Social Networks as Tools of Political Power: Impact on International Security" Translation Practice Report" [《社交网络作为政治权力的工具: 对国际安全的影响》翻译实践报告], master's thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022; a 2020 CSBA report: Guo Chuwei [郭楚微], "A Report on the Translation of "Selective Disclosure: A Strategic Approach to Long-Term Competition" from the Perspective of Chesterman's Translation Norm Theory" ["切斯特曼翻译规范论视角下《选择性披露: 长期竞争的战略方法》翻译实践报告"], master's thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2021; and a 2019 NBR report: Ji Zhen [姬振], "A Translation Report on China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor" [《中国在塔吉克斯坦和阿富汗瓦罕走廊的安全行动》翻译报告], master's thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2020.

[11] Liu Jifeng [刘戟锋], Lu Xiao [卢潇], and Liu Yangyue [刘杨钺], "Technological Support for Strategic Psychological Warfare" [战略心理战的技术支撑], *National Defense* [国防], February 2017. For other references to corpora and IO, see: Li Qiang [李强], Yang Dongsheng [阳东升], Sun Jiangsheng [孙江生], Liu Jianjun [刘建军], Fei Aiguo [费爱国], and Wang Feiyue [王飞跃], "Societal Cognitive Warfare:

Backgrounds, Concepts, Mechanisms and Leading Technologies” [社会认知战:时代背景、概念机理及引领性技术], *Journal of Command and Control* [指挥与控制学报], June 2021.

[12] Li Jian, 2005.

[13] Li Zhen [李真], “Research on End-to-end Neural Network Machine Translation” [“端到端神经网络机器翻译技术研究”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2020.

[14] Li Qike [李启可], “Research on Indian English-Chinese Neural Machine Translation with Language Features” [“融合语言特征的印度英语-汉语神经机器翻译研究”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2019.

[15] Yang Zheng [杨政], “Research on Key Problems of Russian-Chinese Military Speech-to-speech Translation Based on Sequence-to-Sequence” [“基于 Seq2Seq 模型的俄汉军事语音翻译关键问题研究”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2019.

[16] Xia Rongjing [夏榕璟], “Research on English-Chinese Neural Machine Translation of Social Networks for Military-political Domain” [“面向军政领域的社交网络英汉神经机器翻译研究”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022.

[17] Yang Zheng, 2019.

[18] Yang Yuheng [杨宇恒], “Research on machine translation errors and post-translation editing strategies under the guidance of the ‘function + loyalty’ principle” [“功能+忠诚’原则指导下的机器翻译错误及译后编辑策略研究”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2021.

[19] Su Yu [苏昱], “Burmese Translation for China’s International Communication from An Intercultural Perspective: A Case Study of the Burmese Translation of Xi Jinping: The Governance of China” [“跨文化视域下的缅甸语外宣翻译研究:以《习近平谈治国理政》缅译本为例”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2021. For another on Burmese, see: Li Siyuan [李思源], “A Study on the Translation of Chinese Cultural Images in the Burmese Translation of Fortress Besieged under the Guidance of Relevance Adaptation Theory” [“关联顺应理论指导下《围城》缅甸语译本中的中国文化意象翻译研究”], master’s thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022.

[20] Li Qike, 2019.

[21] Xing Mengyang [幸梦阳], "Research on Russian-Chinese Military Speech Translation Based on Transformer" ["基于 Transformer 的俄汉军事语音翻译研究"], master's thesis for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022.

[22] Zhang Guilin [张贵林], "Research on Key Problems in Turkish-Chinese Neural Machine Translation for the Military Domain" ["面向军事领域的土-汉神经机器翻译关键问题研究"], PhD dissertation for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2022.

[23] Xia Rongjing, 2022.

[24] On the Philippines, see: Mou Shan [牟珊] and Zuo Yi [左伊], "Analysis on the Civil and Military Operations of the Philippine Army" ["菲律宾军队民事与军事行动探析"], *Theoretical Studies on PLA Political Work* [军队政工理论研究] 17:1, 2016, pp. 131-134. On Japan, see: Jing Yan [景艳] and Xu Hongliang [徐宏亮], "The impact of Japanese colonial rule on the 'national identity' of the Taiwanese people" ["日本殖民统治对台湾民众“国家认同”的影响"], conference presentation at "The 65th Anniversary of Taiwan's Restoration and the Historical Facts of the Anti-Japanese War" [台湾光复六十五周年暨抗战史实学术研讨会] hosted by Taiwan History Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [中国社会科学院台湾史研究中心], Chongqing Historical and Cultural Research Center of the Chinese Anti-Japanese War Rear Area [重庆市中国抗战大后方历史文化研究中心], and Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences [中国社会科学院近代史研究所], 2010. Authors list affiliations as Voice of the Strait [海峡之声广播电台编辑部] and Huayi Broadcasting [中国华艺广播公司华广网], both known Base 311 front organizations. See also: Wei Qiang [韦强], "Strategic Interactions between Japan and Vietnam on the South China Sea Issue" ["日本与越南在南海问题上的战略互动"], *International Study Reference* [国际研究参考], January 2014; Xi Haiying [席海英] and Zhao Ruofei [赵若飞], "The reasons, approaches and choices for Japan's pursuit of 'national normalization'" ["日本谋求“国家正常化”的根由、途径与选择"], *Economic Research Guide* [经济研究导刊], December 2014, pp. 314-317. Authors list affiliation as Haifeng Publishing House [海风出版社].

[25] See for example: Cheng Baoshan [程宝山], *Basic Issues in Public Opinion Warfare, Psychological Warfare, and Legal Warfare* [舆论战心理战法律战基本问题], Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2004, pp. 117, 282, 284; Ye, 2013, pp. 104, 187-188; Wu & Liu, 2014, pp. 19, 51, 56, 68-69, 187.

[26] Wu & Liu, 2014, p. 56.

[27] For Google Translate, see: Guo Wanghao [郭望皓], “Research on English-Chinese Military Machine Translation Integrating Conceptual Networks and Neural Networks” [“融合概念网络与神经网络的军事领域英汉机器翻译研究”], PhD dissertation for PLASSF Information Engineering University [战略支援部队信息工程大学], 2021; Zhang, 2022. For DeepL, see: Yang, 2021.

PRC Influence via the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries

by Cheryl Yu



CPAFFC Chair Yang Wanming visiting Cagayan, Philippines, on December 16, 2023. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary:

- The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC; 中国人民对外友好协会) is one united front organization among thousands that, along with its affiliate organizations, continues to work with numerous local government officials and organizations across the United States.
- CPAFFC supports people-to-people diplomacy, public diplomacy, and city-to-city diplomacy to advance the Party's global agenda beyond the reach—and notice—of national governments overseas.
- A lack of transparency about united front organizations' perceptions leads to local officials in the United States and elsewhere unwittingly being coopted into promoting party narratives and burnishing the PRC's reputation.
- Examples of CPAFFC activity include the US-China Bay to Bay Dialogue at the UC Berkeley California-China Climate Institute, relationships cultivated with the 'Flying Tigers' veteran air force pilots, exchanges with the University of Virginia, and the series of China-US Sister Cities Conferences.

At the end of May, California Governor Gavin Newsom attended the US-China Bay to Bay Dialogue (中美湾区对话) in Berkeley ([Xinhua](#), May 31). A UC Berkeley California-China Climate Institute press release proclaimed that the dialogue spurred new initiatives between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States ([Berkeley CCCI](#), May 29). It neglected to mention, however, that the dialogue was cohosted by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC; 中国人民对外友好协会). In October 2020, CPAFFC was called out by then-Secretary of State Pompeo for seeking to “directly and malignly influence state and local leaders to promote the PRC’s global agenda” ([US State Department](#), October 28, 2020).

CPAFFC is a Ministry of Foreign Affairs-linked organization that falls under the united front system, which is used to control and mobilize organizations and individuals on the Party's behalf. Like his predecessors, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Xi Jinping has emphasized that the united front is instrumental in realizing the Party's domestic and international ambitions. [1] Despite being a key part of the Party's united front system, CPAFFC and its affiliated organizations continue to work with numerous local government officials and organizations across the United States.

CPAFFC and its Three Missions

Established in 1954, CPAFFC was set up to “lay and expand the social foundation for friendly relations between the PRC and other nations, and garner broad international support for the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics” ([CPAFFC](#), May 2012). The organization usually forms part of the government's foreign affairs offices at the local level despite self-identifying as a non-governmental organization (NGO). It is often headed by officials belonging to the united front system. Its current president, Yang Wanming (杨万明), was formerly deputy director of the Central Hong Kong and Macau Work Office. Its previous president, Li Xiaolin (李小林), was a member of the CPPCC—the highest-ranking body in the united front system, of which Li's father, Li Xiannian (李先念), was once chairman. Another former president, Lin Songtian (林松添), is now deputy director of the CPPCC's Foreign Affairs Committee.

Lin has stated that the organization's three main roles are to “spearhead people-to-people diplomacy, serve as the backbone of public diplomacy, and act as a bridge in city diplomacy” ([Huai'an City Government](#), March 7, 2023). At an event in October 2021 commemorating the centenary of the birth of American nuclear physicist Joan Hinton, [2] Lin stated that CPAFFC would continue to “unite all forces that can be united, actively engage in fostering mutual understanding between the Chinese and foreign peoples, and promote the great cause of building a community of common destiny for mankind” ([Guangxi Government](#), October 22, 2021). [3] In this way, CPAFFC supports the Party's global ambitions.

Spearheading 'People-To-People' Diplomacy

People-to-people diplomacy usually entails relationship-building via NGOs and individuals of different states. For the PRC, however, it reflects of the CCP's mass line and its theory of the united front ([CPIFA](#), 2019). At a

Tsinghua University seminar in 2009, Li Xiaolin articulated the concept as “targeted cooperation with foreign organizations and individuals” through which they “come to understand and love the PRC.” The aim of these activities is to “create a favorable and friendly atmosphere ... toward the PRC.” All this occurs “under the organization and support of the [PRC] government at all levels” ([Charhar Institute](#), April 10, 2013). [4]

In May 2014 at an event to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the CPAFFC, Xi Jinping stated that the organization should “make friends widely and establish good relationships” and “create more platforms for cooperation and guide foreign institutions and outstanding talents to participate in the PRC’s modernization efforts” ([Xinhua](#), May 15, 2014). Lin Songtian has also described people-to-people diplomacy as “mobilizing the enthusiasm of local friendship associations, sister cities, and friends to form a synergistic effort” ([CIIS](#), May 24, 2022). If done successfully, it should lead to foreigners “sympathizing with, supporting, and explaining the cause of the CCP” ([CPIFA](#), 2019).

A good example of CPAFFC’s people-to-people diplomacy is the relationship it has built with the First American Volunteer Group (AVG) of the Republic of China Air Force, also known as the Flying Tigers. Following Xi Jinping’s letter to the Sino-American Aviation Heritage Foundation and Flying Tigers veterans in late October 2023, CPAFFC hosted the 80th Anniversary of the US 14th Air Force’s Participation in China’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression at Beijing’s museum to commemorate the war ([China Diplomacy](#), October 31, 2023). The foundation, Flying Tigers veterans and their families, and California local government officials attended the event. Jeffrey Greene, the foundation’s current chair, stated at the event that “the veterans of the Flying Tigers, as well as the younger generation, will continue to tell stories of the friendly exchanges between our two countries when they return to the United States.” Earlier this year, CPAFFC President Yang visited the Jack Lund Schofield Middle School in Las Vegas, Nevada ([Lhasa Government](#), February 5). The school is the first “Flying Tigers Friendship School” in the United States. It was established under an MOU signed in September 2022 by representatives from the school and the Liuzhou People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (柳州市人民对外友好协会), a local branch of CPAFFC. During the visit, Yang announced an exchange and study program for students to visit the PRC to enhance friendships and strengthen relationships between Chinese and American youth ([China Military](#), June 15, 2023).

Another example is that of the Beijing People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (BPAFFC; 北京市人民对外友好协会), a branch of CPAFFC that receives guidance from CPAFFC. BPAFFC recently invited a student delegation from the University of Virginia (UVA) to visit Beijing ([Tsinghua University](#), January 10). The trip constituted a January Term course titled “Game Change: Bridging the US-China Divide through Sport” whose instructors were Stephen Mull, Vice Provost for Global Affairs at UVA and former Acting Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and Justin O’Jack, Chief Representative of the UVA China Office ([UVA](#), accessed June 11). UVA students attended the US-China Youth Ping-Pong Exchange at Tsinghua University co-hosted by BPAFFC to commemorate China-US “Ping Pong Diplomacy” and the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the PRC and the United States ([Tsinghua University](#), January 10). The delegation also attended a reception jointly held by CPAFFC and the Chinese

People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA; 中国人民外交学会), an initiative established by then-PRC Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhou Enlai in 1949 as the first people-to-people diplomacy entity ([CPIFA](#), Accessed June 14). As head of the delegation, Mull hoped that UVA students would “experience China’s long history and culture and establish a lasting friendship between both parties.” In the future, he added, UVA hopes to “organize more Chinese-American student exchange activities to encourage more American students to come to China and experience it” ([News China](#), January 11).

People-to-people diplomacy is a proven tool for the PRC to foster favorable international perceptions and enhance its soft power. Student programs set up through CPAFFC promote the Party’s narratives of what the “real China” is like, while bypassing official diplomatic channels. These activities persist despite US State Department warnings that US citizens should “reconsider travel to Mainland China due to the arbitrary enforcement of local laws, including in relation to exit bans, and the risk of wrongful detentions” ([US DoS](#), April 12). When executed effectively, such engagements create a dissonance between the participants’ personal experiences and the concerns expressed by their own government.

‘Serving as the Backbone of Public Diplomacy’

Public diplomacy, according to a Former Director of the State Council Information Office, covers international exchange activities that express and explain a country’s situation and policies to foreigners. This is done by the government, public organizations, the media, and individuals ([Qiushi](#), April 11, 2018). For CPAFFC, public diplomacy is expected to serve the government’s needs by using its relationships and resources to support the dissemination of propaganda. Xi expects CPAFFC to “participate widely in activities of international NGOs, spreading China’s voice and telling China’s stories well, and presenting to the world an authentic, multidimensional, and comprehensive China” ([Xinhua](#), May 15, 2014). In practical terms, Lin Songtian takes this to mean “mobilizing think tanks, the media, and online platforms both domestically and internationally, and effectively connecting, establishing, and utilizing these networks and platforms, and striving to achieve the ‘four haves (四有)’ goal of ‘having places to speak, having people to speak to, having people to listen, and having people to believe in what is heard’” ([CIIS](#), May 24, 2022).

In October 2023, CPAFFC co-hosted the 8th China Global Think Tank Innovation Forum with the Center for China & Globalization (CCG), an organization that is part of the united front system ([CCG](#), October 23, 2023). The event, says CPAFFC President Yang, “enabled CPAFFC and CCG to strengthen links and exchanges with think tanks around the world and lay a foundation for future dialogue and cooperation.” He encouraged attendees to “implement pathways to serve building a community of common destiny for mankind through their work.” Michael Pillsbury, Joseph Nye, Doug Bandow, and Colin Bradford were among those who took part. [5]

Earlier this year, Yang took a 12-day trip to the United States, visiting Washington D.C., Nevada, Texas, California, and Washington. The aim of the trip was to “promote the implementation of the important consensus reached at the San Francisco meeting between the PRC and US heads of state at the grassroots and local levels.” During his trip, he met with former US officials, including former governor of Missouri Bob

Holden and former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas A. Shannon Jr., as well as think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Stimson Center, and the Wilson Center ([Guangxi Government](#), February 5). Yang also met Clarence E. Anthony, CEO and Executive Director of the National League of Cities (NLC), which its website calls “the largest and oldest organization representing America’s cities, towns, and villages, and their leaders” ([NLC](#), accessed June 11).

The PRC uses public diplomacy to shape narratives overseas and foster strategic alliances. Those who attend CPAFFC events provide platforms for advancing PRC messaging, implicitly condoning its activities regardless of the meetings’ outcomes. These meetings are then covered in state media for domestic audiences, allowing US entities to provide the CCP with a veneer of legitimacy.

‘A Bridge in City Diplomacy’

CPAFFC has a long history of helping build friendly relationships between cities. In March 1992, it initiated the China International Friendship Cities Association (中国国际友好城市联合会) to promote exchanges and cooperation between PRC and foreign cities and local governments in economic, political, cultural, and social domains ([Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture Government](#), September 8, 2008; [Dongguan City Government](#), February 15, 2012). This cooperation is, in part, intended to serve the development of the PRC and its provinces. In May 2014, at the 60th Anniversary of the Founding of CPAFFC, Xi Jinping used the term “city diplomacy” to describe this kind of work—the first time it had been used by a national leader ([Charhar Institute](#), September 1, 2017). He demanded that CPAFFC “vigorously carry out the work of the PRC’s international sister cities, enhance exchanges between local governments at home and abroad, and promote resource sharing, complementary advantages, and win-win cooperation)” ([Xinhua](#), May 15, 2014).

At this year’s Bay to Bay Dialogue in Berkeley, Yang Wanming said that he hoped to use this dialogue as “a new starting point to actively promote provinces, states, and cities in China and the United States to fully demonstrate local vitality,” aligning with the organization’s role in acting as a bridge in city diplomacy ([Xinhua](#), May 31). The dialogue appeared to have achieved CPAFFC’s desired results. At the event, Governor Newsom stated that the two bay areas “have broad common interests in areas such as jointly addressing climate change, new energy technologies and industries, and sustainable development.” The fact that this other “bay area” is an initiative started by Xi Jinping that leverages Hong Kong’s international status to support Beijing’s military-civil fusion development strategy went unmentioned ([China Brief](#), January 19).

In November 2023, CPAFFC hosted the Fifth China-US Sister Cities Conference (第五届中美友城大会) in Suzhou alongside the Jiangsu government. At the opening ceremony, Vice Chairman of the CPPCC Zhu Yongxin (朱永新) read out a letter to the conference from Xi ([Jiangsu CCP Committee](#), November 4, 2023). Attendees came from over 10 PRC provinces and nearly 20 US counties and cities. California’s delegation included six city and county heads and was organized by the US-Sino Friendship Association (美华友好协会), a united front organization headed by Simon Pang (冯振发) ([Shanghai Government](#), November 8, 2023). Pang has been awarded the honorary title of “Sino-US Friendship Envoy (中美友好使者)” from

CPAFFC and is also an Overseas Honorary Director of Shanghai People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (SPAFFC) ([Sohu](#), December 12, 2019; [Shanghai Government](#), November 8, 2023). SPAFFC receives guidance from CPAFFC ([Shanghai Government](#), September 7, 2022). In December 2021, Pang was appointed by President Biden as a commissioner to the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders ([White House](#), December 20, 2021). Carol Lopez, Chair Emeritus of Sister Cities International—an organization founded by President Eisenhower in 1956 to “bring peace through people-to-people diplomacy”—also attended the event, as did others such as the mayor of Rochester, Minnesota and a former majority leader of the California State Senate ([People's Daily](#), November 4, 2023).

Subnational diplomacy provides a key avenue for the CPAFFC to advance the Party's agenda. The US officials and civil society members who attend the events and meetings it hosts are often not fully aware of how the CCP operates by using local partnerships to promote national-level strategies that harm US interests. The Party exploits these spaces where the United States currently lacks the capacity to respond effectively.

Conclusion

CPAFFC is one among thousands of organizations the Party instrumentalizes to achieve its global ambitions. Most of these organizations operate as nonprofits or NGOs, including a large number in the United States. CPAFFC is one of the few that have been noticed. In October 2020, the US State Department described CPAFFC as being “tasked with co-opting subnational governments” and consequently withdrew its participation in a 2011 MOU between the United States and the PRC that supported the creation of a US-China National Governors Forum ([US Department of State](#), October 28, 2020). Nevertheless, the organization remains active in arranging meetings with local US officials and fostering relationships between the United States and the PRC. Many state and local officials, universities, think tanks, and other organizations in the United States seem unaware of the broader objectives behind the initiatives and exchanges that CPAFFC facilitates. More concerning is the sense that at least some of these officials and organizations appear comfortable ignoring CCP attempts to expand its influence in the United States.

Cheryl Yu is a Fellow in China Studies at the Jamestown Foundation and the author of an upcoming report on united front groups in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany.

Notes

[1] For more on how the CCP aims to use united front work to achieve its global ambitions, see the following: Tobin, Daniel. “How Xi Jinping's ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate on Beijing's Ambitions.” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 13, 2020. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/testimonies/SFR%20for%20USCC%20TobinD%20200313.pdf>; Tobin, Liza. “Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies.” Texas National Security Review, November 2018. <https://tnsr.org/2018/11/xis-vision-for-transforming-global-governance-a-strategic-challenge-for-washington-and-its-allies/>; Jinping, Xi. “Speech at a Ceremony

Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China.” Xinhua July 1, 2021.

http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm; Mattis, Peter. “Out with the New, In with the Old: Interpreting China’s ‘New Type of International Relations’.” *China Brief*, April 25, 2013.

<https://jamestown.org/program/out-with-the-new-in-with-the-old-interpreting-chinas-new-type-of-international-relations/>; Joske, Alex. “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work.” *China Brief*, May 9, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/>;

Mattis, Peter and Joske, Alex. “The Third Magic Weapon: Reforming China’s United Front.” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2019. <https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/the-third-magic-weapon-reforming-chinas-united-front/>.

[2] Joan Hinton and her husband Erwin Engst were firm believers in communism and adherents of Mao Zedong, as was Joan’s brother, William H. Hinton, one of the most prominent pro-CCP Americans of the 20th Century. Between 1975 and 1977, they were invited by the US–China Peoples Friendship Association to give speeches in the United States, of which William H. Hinton was the first national chairman. They were all considered “Good Friends of the Chinese People.”

[3] The phrase “Unite all forces that can be united” is part of the guiding language of the united front. In April 1956, at a meeting with representatives from parties in Latin American countries, Mao Zedong said, “we must unite with all those who can be united. In this way, we can reduce the number of enemies to the smallest number ... for us, the more friends the better and the fewer enemies the better.” In 1981, the CCP Central Committee passed a resolution that stated, “we must unwaveringly unite all forces that can be united to consolidate and expand the patriotic united front.” In July 2021, Xi Jinping too said that the CCP “constantly consolidates and develops the broadest united front, unites all forces that can be united, and mobilizes all positive factors that can be mobilized” and that “the patriotic united front is an important magic weapon for the CCP to unite all Chinese people at home and abroad to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” United front work is “the CCP’s efforts to strengthen and expand the united front by influencing and co-opting targets.” See Joske, Alex. “The Party Speaks For You.” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 9, 2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>

[4] The full quote reads as follows: “People-to-people diplomacy is under the organization and support of the government at all levels. Specific institutions and individuals have emerged in a non-governmental form to carry out targeted cooperation with foreign organizations and individuals. Through these exchanges and collaborations, foreign organizations and individuals come to understand and love the PRC, and subsequently leverage these organizations and individuals’ influence in their own countries to gradually create a favorable and friendly atmosphere and public opinion toward the PRC, promoting the deepening of bilateral relations (在各级政府的组织和支持下，由特定的机构和人士以民间形式出现，有针对性地与国外组织和个人开展合作。通过这些交流合作，使国外的组织和个人了解中国、热爱中国，进而借重这些组织和个人在本国的影响力，逐步在该国形成对华友好的积极气氛和舆论环境，推动该国对华关系的发展深化。民间外交可以以更直接、更具亲和力的形

式做好 外国公众和主流社会人士的友好工作，可以更有效地展示本国的文化吸引力和政治影响力，改善国际舆论环境，维护国家利益)。”

[5] Michael Pillsbury is a Senior Fellow at The Heritage Foundation; Joseph Nye is University a Distinguished Service Professor, Emeritus and former Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government; Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the CATO Institute; and Colin Bradford is a Senior Fellow of the Global Economy and Development Program at the Brookings Institution.

Taiwan in Focus at the Shangri-La Dialogue

by Ying Yu Lin & Tzu-Hao Liao



US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III meets with Peoples Republic of China Minister of Defense, Adm. Dong Jun in Singapore, May 31, 2024. ([DVIDS](#), May 31)

Executive Summary:

- PRC Defense Minister Dong Jun’s experience in international military exchanges allowed him to showcase a blend of assertiveness in his speeches and a congenial rapport with foreign journalists during his appearance at this year’s Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.
- The Dialogue saw a notable emphasis on Taiwan in the PRC delegation’s remarks, with officials seeking to play down the “China threat” narrative despite recent Joint Sword 2024A exercises surrounding the island.
- Dong reiterated the position that Taiwan independence and external interference constitute red lines that the PRC is prepared to defend by force if necessary, indicating Beijing’s primary objective at the dialogue was to project a resolute stance against foreign interference to audiences both international and domestic.

Admiral Dong Jun (董军), Minister of National Defense for the People's Republic of China (PRC), recently engaged in formal discussions with United States Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at the annual Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore ([MND](#), May 31). This was their first face-to-face meeting since 2022. The dialogue was predictable, with both parties adhering strictly to their respective viewpoints. It was also largely symbolic as a channel for military diplomacy, as the minister has a peripheral role within the PRC's overall military command structure. Dong's and others' comments on Taiwan were particularly noteworthy, especially in the context of recent military exercises and increased gray-zone activities since the inauguration of President Lai Ching-te (赖清德) in January.

It is noteworthy that the PRC is demonstrating a proactive approach toward media engagement, convening multiple press conferences and showcasing a well-prepared public relations strategy. In this sense, it was relatively more active than that the United States at the Dialogue ([US DOD](#), June 1). Dong's speech on June 2 highlighted the PRC's intention to employ a dual strategy of both assertive and diplomatic measures with the aim of projecting and reinforcing the PRC's desired image of itself as a major global power ([YouTube/IISS](#), June 3).

The PRC's Evolving Representation at the Shangri-La Dialogue

International fora provide a platform for the PRC to voice its discontent in targeted ways. For instance, during this year's conference, Senior Colonel Cao Yanzhong (曹延忠) from the Academy of Military Sciences asked Secretary Austin whether the United States was attempting to establish an "Asian NATO." He followed this by asserting that "NATO's eastward expansion led to the Ukraine crisis" and questioned what impact the strengthening of the US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific would have on regional security and stability ([DVIDS](#), May 31).

Over years of participating in international and regional fora, PRC representatives have become adept at navigating the public diplomatic landscape. They skillfully use speeches and pointed questions to increase military transparency and assert the PRC's positions in front of a global audience. Simultaneously, these actions also serve to fuel domestic propaganda, reinforcing the government's stance within the PRC. This approach ensures that the PRC's international posturing also resonates within its borders, seamlessly packaging their narrative for domestic consumption.

The PRC has participated in the Shangri-La Dialogue since 2007, where it has traditionally been represented by deputy chiefs of the General Staff such as Ma Xiaotian (马晓天), Wang Guanzhong (王冠中), Qi Jianguo (戚建国), and Sun Jianguo (孙建国). In 2011, then-Defense Minister Liang Guanglie (梁光烈) led the delegation—the highest-level PRC official to attend. In 2012, the delegation was downgraded, led by then-Vice President of the Academy of Military Sciences Ren Haiquan (任海泉). This was likely due to preparations for the 18th Party Congress later that year and concerns over domestic reactions to discussions about the PRC's actions in the South China Sea (SCS). Subsequent years saw a return to the norm of

delegations led by deputy chiefs of the General Staff, with occasional deviations such as the attendance of Lieutenant General He Lei (何雷), Vice President of the Academy of Military Sciences, in 2017 and 2018.

Since 2019, the PRC delegation has been led by the Minister of National Defense. In 2019, the minister was Wei Fenghe (魏凤和), a former member of the Rocket Force and a quintessential field officer. His interactions with journalists were marked by a forthright military demeanor. Once the Dialogue was resumed in 2022 following the pandemic, his successor Li Shangfu (李尚福) led the delegation. Unlike Wei Fenghe, Li's background primarily in the General Armaments Department and the Xichang Satellite Launch Center endowed him with extensive technological expertise. However, his lack of experience in high-level military diplomacy raised concerns about his ability to effectively engage with foreign military officials. This year, Minister Dong Jun's extensive experience in international military exchanges allowed him to showcase a blend of assertiveness in his speeches and a congenial rapport with foreign journalists (see [China Brief](#), February 2). This is likely a product of a career in the PLA Navy, which is traditionally tasked with diplomatic missions. For instance, among his more strident official statements, a more casual side of the man was on display while engaging with American journalists ([BRTV](#), May 31). No doubt premeditated, at one point while cleaning his glasses he chatted to the press pack about panda diplomacy in relatively friendly terms. This reinforces the view that, at least on the surface, the PRC has shifted away from "wolf warrior diplomacy" since the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference last December ([China Brief](#), April 12). This dual approach, combining firmness with diplomatic engagement, indicates that Dong will likely be a more effective minister in charge of military diplomacy.

Aims to Mitigate Perceptions of the 'China Threat'

The Shangri-La Dialogue took place immediately following PRC's Joint Sword-2024A military exercise and amid ongoing clashes between the PRC and the Philippines in the SCS ([MND](#), May 23; [Manila Times](#), June 4). The PRC delegation was therefore scrutinized heavily during the Dialogue. For the PRC, the Dialogue presented an opportunity to articulate its positions, justify its military maneuvers, and counter the prevailing "China threat" narrative that frames the PRC as the principal destabilizing force in the region, seeking to replace the United States as the hegemonic power ([China's Diplomacy in the New Era](#), April 8). By expressing its intent to continue dialogue with the United States, bridge differences, and advocate for shared regional prosperity and strategic autonomy, the PRC intended to frame itself as morally superior to the United States and to belie the "China threat" narrative. In so doing, the PRC hopes to encourage states in the region to move toward genuine multilateral cooperation rather than aligning with the United States' unilateralism.

In his address, Admiral Dong invoked solidarity with developing countries, emphasizing the shared anti-hegemonic and anti-colonial histories of the PRC and its neighbors ([IISS](#), June 2). Near the top of his remarks, he appeared to invoke the ancient Chinese aphorism that "a close neighbor is better than a distant relative (远亲不如近邻)," noting that these countries have "worked in solidarity to resist aggression, fight disasters, and pursue development. We wish each other well as neighbors just as members of a family do."

He also proposed concrete strategies to support weaker nations, aiming to create a vision of shared governance, particularly in Southeast Asia, under the guise of equality ([IISS](#), June 2).

The PRC delegation also interacted with representatives from various countries while at the Dialogue, signaling a potential return to the proactive foreign diplomacy observed around 2014 when the PRC invested more in UN Peacekeeping operations ([National Institute for Defense Studies](#), March 2015). The overarching aim of these interactions was not merely military diplomacy but also to dilute the “China threat” narrative. Specifically, the PRC sought to clarify that its military exercises targeting Taiwan were solely focused on countering Taiwanese independence movements and did not pose a threat to other nations. This message was intended to reinforce the notion that so long as foreign countries refrain from interfering in the PRC’s domestic affairs, stability would be maintained. This delineation has consistently been a core aspect of the PRC’s international strategy.

Dueling Perceptions of Taiwan at the Dialogue

The Taiwan issue is the foundation of the “China Threat” narrative. The PRC stance on Taiwan was unequivocal throughout General Dong’s and Secretary Austin’s interactions, as well as in Dong’s plenary speech. Namely, that while the PRC is open to international consultation on regional stability in the SCS and other global issues, the Taiwan Strait remains an inviolable red line and non-negotiable with any foreign entity ([MND](#), May 31). He framed DPP politicians as charlatans who would be “nailed to the pillar of shame in history,” and warned that the PLA would “remain a strong force for upholding national reunification.” He also urged East Asian countries to consider the implications carefully, stating that “anyone who dares to separate Taiwan from China will only end up in self-destruction” ([IISS](#), June 2). During his speech, Dong ignored the moderator to repeatedly stress the Taiwan issue. Articles on PRC media platforms later unanimously criticized the moderator’s professionalism ([China.com](#), June 4; [CCTV](#), June 2). One, published by a senior journalist from Phoenix TV, analogized this behavior to the Western tradition of infringing upon PRC sovereignty through “hegemonic (霸道)” actions ([Tencent](#), June 8).

The PRC has categorized the Lai administration as proponents of Taiwanese independence, asserting that Taiwan is at the heart of its core interests and that unification is inevitable ([TAO](#), May 29). This rhetoric coupled with heightened military actions foreshadows increased pressure on Taiwan’s national security in the coming four years. The PRC has also emphasized to the United States that hard-won military to military communication is predicated on the latter respecting their core interests over the island. This is undoubtedly an attempt to tie continuing mil-mil dialogues to the Taiwan issue. It also sets a precondition for military exchanges with other countries.

Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles articulated a more nuanced view on the PRC during a sideline discussion at the Dialogue ([Australian Department of Defense](#), June 1). Marles acknowledged the recent stabilization of trade relations with the PRC but expressed strong dissatisfaction with its recent gray-zone activities in the SCS and its erosion of the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, citing the PLA’s “record number of incursions across the median line” so far this year. Indeed, the sequence of events, from Nauru severing

diplomatic ties with Taiwan at the beginning of the year to the Joint Sword exercises, is indicative of the PRC's sustained psychological and military pressure on Taiwan ([US DOS](#), January 15). Marles also emphasized that the PRC should shoulder the burden of upholding existing international rules, arguing that the international order cannot develop in an environment "where sovereign rights and international law are ignored, especially by great powers."

PLA representatives' direct rebuttals to Marles's remarks highlighted the tensions and indicated areas of disagreement as well as fundamental differences of understanding on the issues ([IISS](#), June 1). One PLA officer confronted Marles on the SCS issue, saying that the PRC has the natural right to defend its national security. Another said there were at least two mistakes in Marles's speech, first that "Taiwan is one province of China, and we will not endanger the Taiwan people's security and life," and second that he "didn't mention that the Philippines, their ship, intentionally collided with China's coast guard ships." The Philippine government disputes this characterization of events. Australia nevertheless also expressed a willingness to engage with the PRC to prevent potential conflicts. This indicates a dual strategy of maintaining engagement while aligning with the United States' strategy of military deterrence to counter any aggressive moves by the PRC.

Conclusion

Since President Lai's election in January, the CCP has employed a series of psychological and physical intimidation measures against the island as part of a broader campaign by Beijing to undermine its sovereignty. Some actions appear to test Taiwan's thresholds and policy responses, such as recent civilian drone incursions over its outlying islands and aggressive maneuvers by speedboats in the Tamsui river. These incidents, reminiscent of previous drone harassment, occur whenever Taiwan discusses adjustments to its Rules of Engagement (ROE) or First-Strike policies. Such gray-zone operations, designed to gauge Taiwan's defensive responses, are among the multifaceted threats Taiwan faces beyond conventional PLA military exercises. Consequently, Taiwan must remain vigilant and adapt its defensive strategies to counter these evolving threats.

The Shangri-La Dialogue saw a notable emphasis on the Taiwan issue in the PRC delegation's remarks. PLA officials reiterated the position that Taiwan independence and external interference constitute red lines that the PRC is prepared to defend by force if necessary. This rhetoric may not resonate universally on the international stage, but Beijing's primary objective at the Dialogue was to project a resolute stance against foreign interference both internationally and domestically. This strategy was further bolstered by the attention garnered by the newly appointed Defense Minister Dong Jun, enabling Beijing to achieve its dual aims of boosting internal propaganda and external posturing, effectively concluding the narrative set by the Joint Sword 2024A exercises.

Dr. Ying Yu Lin is an assistant professor at the Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies Tamkang University in New Taipei City, Taiwan and a research fellow at the Association of Strategic Foresight. He received his PhD in the Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies, Tamkang University. His research interests include PLA studies and cybersecurity.

Tzu-Hao Liao is a consultant for the PRC research team at the International Crisis Group. He holds a BA in political science from National Chengchi University (Taiwan) and an MA in War Studies from King's College London.

Georgia's Anaklia Port and PRC Infrastructure Strategy

by Lea Thome



A closed Chinese restaurant along the beach at Anaklia, Georgia. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary:

- The acquisition of a 49 percent stake in a Georgian port by a state-backed consortium advances the PRC's global port strategy—the PRC currently owns stakes in over 90 ports). As Xi Jinping has stated, “to become rich, one must first build ports.”
- A new port at Anaklia will contribute an additional node to the Middle Corridor (or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route), allowing trade to bypass both the Northern Corridor, which transits through Russia and Belarus, and traditional maritime routes through the Strait of Malacca and the Red Sea—both current geopolitical hotspots.
- The agreement reflects Georgia's increasing turn away from the West, while an earlier decision from a US firm to pass on the opportunity to develop the port reflects the United States' lack of serious competition to the PRC in developing infrastructure across the world.

On May 29, the Georgian Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Levan Davitashvili, announced that a consortium of firms from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Singapore would construct the new deep-sea port of Anaklia, located in western Georgia on the Black Sea ([Agenda.ge](#), May 29). A restricted tender for the construction of the port was announced in 2023. Although a Swiss-Singaporean consortium, Terminal Investment Limited Holding S.A. (TiL), was also shortlisted, only the PRC group ended up following through with the tender process (Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia (MESDG); [March 2](#), [September 20, 2023](#)).

Anaklia is located at a strategically important location along the Black Sea and would join Georgia's four pre-existing ports: Poti, Batumi, Kulevi, and Supsa. Poti currently serves as the country's busiest port, handling about 80 percent of its container traffic ([APM Terminals](#), accessed June 4), but Anaklia Port might offer the opportunity to compete with other ports along the Black Sea—a region that has been impacted heavily by recent geopolitical tensions. This latest investment will advance PRC interests, including greater regional connectivity amid Russia's preoccupation with its war in Ukraine, and its wider strategy to construct ports globally.

Anaklia Port and the New Investment Deal

Initial plans to construct the port at Anaklia first emerged in the early 2010s, but the development has been marred by multiple mishaps. In the early stages of planning in 2016, Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC)—composed of TBC Holding from Georgia and the US-based Conti Group—was awarded the tender to exclusively “construct, develop, and operate” the port (Anaklia Development Consortium; accessed [June 4](#), [October 3, 2016](#); [Civil.ge](#), accessed June 4;). SSA Marine, a US company headquartered in Seattle, was also selected as a terminal operator. In 2019 however, soon after the awarding of the contract to ADC, the project came to a halt. A corruption investigation into TBC's owners ultimately led to criminal charges ([Transparency International Georgia](#), February 16, 2019). Consequently, Conti Group abandoned its 42 percent stake in ADC. Now, almost five years later, the Georgian government is eager to move ahead with the development and construction of the port.

The PRC's interest in Anaklia Port is also not new. In 2018, Georgian officials met with interested investors, the China Railway International Group (CRECGI; 中铁国际集团), and discussions with the then-PRC ambassador on the port investment and creation of a free industrial zone followed (MESDG; [July 2, 2018](#), [September 1, 2018](#)). Last year, Minister Davitashvili shared that an official concession and partnership agreement will be negotiated following the announcement of the winning tender. The Georgian government—either directly or via a state-owned company—is expected to hold a 51 percent ownership stake in the Port of Anaklia, while the foreign company will hold a minority stake of 49 percent. Construction is planned to start upon the conclusion of the private partner agreement, after which operations are expected to commence within three years ([MESDG](#); February 2, 2023).

That the majority state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) has successfully bid to construct the port highlights the PRC's sustained interest in infrastructure development throughout the

region. The earlier withdrawal of US firms from the project also indicates how the United States is ceding ground across the globe in this area. It is notable that CCCC has been on the US Bureau of Industry and Security Entity List since December 2020 due to enabling the PRC “to reclaim and militarize disputed outposts in the South China Sea, which has been detrimental to US national security” ([Federal Register](#), December 22, 2020). This also reflects broader trends in the current Georgian government’s geopolitical orientation away from the West.

Growing PRC–Georgia Partnership

Tbilisi awarding CCCC the contract to construct the port in Anaklia highlights a decade-long trend of growing partnership between the PRC and Georgia. While the two countries have maintained a bilateral relationship for over three decades, it was not until 2013 that the relationship began to strengthen. On December 1, 2016, Georgia officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ([Green FDC](#), accessed June 19).

In 2015, Georgia’s Ministry of Economy initiated a Free Trade Agreement between the two countries following the publication of a joint feasibility study ([UIBE & PMC Research Center](#), August, 2015). At the time of the study, Georgia’s top total trading partners were mostly regional neighbors, such as Turkey (17.2 percent), Azerbaijan (10.3 percent), and Russia (7.4 percent), though the PRC was already its fourth largest trading partner, accounting for 7.3 percent. An agreement was officially signed on May 13, 2017, between former Georgian First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Dimitry Kumsishvili and then-PRC Minister of Commerce Zhong Shan (钟山). It officially came into effect on January 1, 2018 ([MOFCOM](#), May 15, 2017).

In 2023, the PRC–Georgia relationship was further cemented through the signing of an official strategic partnership (战略伙伴关系) following then-prime minister Irakli Garibashvili’s meeting with Xi that July ([MFA](#), July 28, 2023). Three days later, Garibashvili also met with Premier Li Qiang (李强) to ratify the partnership, which saw both countries share a “commitment to expanding cooperation in the political, economic, and cultural fields, strengthening collaboration in international affairs, deepening bilateral relations, and safeguarding regional and world peace, stability, and development together” ([Embassy of the PRC in Georgia](#), August 7, 2023).

The most recent development came in April when the two countries signed a visa exemption agreement allowing Georgian citizens to enter the PRC without a visa for up to 30 days ([MFA of Georgia](#), April 10). This exemption officially entered into effect on May 28 amid a period of domestic instability surrounding foreign interference and influence in the Georgian domestic landscape ([Civil.ge](#), May 28).

Also of note is Georgia’s new On Transparency on Foreign Influence legislation, which was signed into law by Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Shalva Papuashvili, after it was initially vetoed by President Salome Zurbishvili ([Jurist News](#), June 3; [MATSNE](#), June 3, 2024). This new legislation will create a registry of foreign agents including “media and non-profit organizations that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from abroad, with possible repercussions for non-compliance” ([Jurist News](#), June 3). While this law

specifically addressed the civil society landscape in Georgia, its effects have not yet carried over to scrutiny into foreign companies and foreign investments within the Georgian economy (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*; [April 24](#), [May 1](#), [May 13](#), [May 22](#); *Terrorism Monitor*, December 15, 2023). As this law is widely understood as part of a broader orientation in Georgian politics away from the United States and the European Union, it is unlikely that PRC investments in the country will be impacted, however. If anything, they may well increase in the coming years.

PRC Strategic Interest in Regional Connectivity and Ports

Two strategic interests are at play for the PRC both in Georgia and in the greater Central Asia and South Caucasus region. These are greater regional connectivity amid Russia's preoccupation with its war in Ukraine, and the PRC's interest in constructing ports globally.

The PRC's interest in Georgia constitutes part of a wider focus on deepening economic and transport integration with the wider region. The Middle Corridor (MC) is key to this strategy. Also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), the MC is a route linking the PRC to Europe and the rest of the world via Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and then either the Black Sea or Turkey.

TITR offers an alternative to both the Northern Corridor, which transits Russia and Belarus, and traditional maritime routes through the Strait of Malacca and the Red Sea. It has become more popular in recent years as the former has been slowed by Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the latter have faced security challenges, as witnessed during the ongoing Red Sea Crisis (*EDM*; [March 14](#), [August 4, 2022](#); *TM*, December 15, 2023). TITR's potential is yet to be realized amid multiple operational constraints leading to long transit times. Nevertheless, a 2023 World Bank study found that its trade volumes are expected to triple by 2030 and that in the immediate response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, container traffic "increased by 33 percent in 2022 compared to 2021" ([World Bank](#), November 2023).

The PRC has invested in transportation and maritime infrastructure all along TITR. In October 2023, PRC and Kazakh government officials and companies signed 30 documents on intergovernmental cooperation to develop TITR, including "building the Tacheng–Ayagoz railway line, constructing a third railway checkpoint between Kazakhstan and the PRC, and establishing border terminal facilities" (*The Astana Times*, October 27, 2023). In Azerbaijan, Beijing gave more than three million dollars' worth of equipment to the Baku International Sea Trade Port Assistance Project ([Aiddata](#), accessed June 4). Anaklia Port will also further enhance its positions as an attractive alternative route, with the help of the Chinese–Singaporean consortium.

The PRC's maritime and commercial port chain (商业港口链) strategy now sees PRC companies invested in over 92 port projects across the globe, of which Anaklia is the most recent ([CFR](#), November 6, 2023). These companies are already invested in the region through the Ukrainian Port of Odesa, also situated on the coastline of the Black Sea, and Kumport in Turkey, which opens maritime commerce up to the Aegean Sea. But these ports have taken place and shape all across the globe, in a PRC bid to secure strategic

strongpoints at major maritime chokepoints and sea lines of communication (SLOCs) (see [China Brief](#), March 2019).

Back in 2017, PRC President Xi Jinping articulated his belief that ports enrich the prosperity of both the PRC and its partner countries, saying that “to become rich, one must first build ports (要想富也要先建港)” ([81.cn](#), May 29, 2024). This accords with the PRC’s vision of “[building] a world of common prosperity through win-win cooperation (人类命运共同体，就是 ... 合作共赢),” described in a recently published white paper on the topic ([gov.cn](#), September 23, 2023). While the PRC sees port-building projects like Anaklia Port as mutually beneficial infrastructure initiatives, these projects also empower the PRC to exert its economic influence abroad through the management of global cargo flows and port terminals ([International Security](#), April 1, 2022).

PRC-built and managed ports have seen varying degrees of success, however. While Greece’s Piraeus Port has been turned around from bankruptcy since its change in ownership to PRC state-owned enterprise COSCO, a financing debacle at Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka led to China Merchant Ports (招商局控股港口) acquiring a concession over the port through a 99-year lease ([World Cargo News](#), April 2), initially constructed by CCCC’s subsidiary China Harbor Engineering Company (中国港湾工程). The Georgian government’s awarding of the tender will at last allow the construction of Anaklia Port to move forward almost a decade after its inception, but the success of the port remains yet to be determined.

Conclusion

Anaklia Port, once complete, will become a vital part of the Middle Corridor, improving regional connectivity within Central Asia and the South Caucasus—and also with the PRC. One remaining sticking point, however, is the nature of the port partnership and concession agreement, which is yet to be finalized but will see the PRC-led consortium hold a minority stake of 49 percent. CCCC’s stake makes it a junior partner to the Georgian government, but it still constitutes a substantial contribution toward the port’s construction and eventual management. Such a stake is not atypical, as only 13 of 92 port projects globally have a majority Chinese ownership stake ([Council on Foreign Relations](#), November 6, 2023). Yet this allows CCCC—and the PRC state that lies behind it—to realize its two strategic interests of expanding regional connectivity and partnerships and advancing its global commercial port chain.

As regional coordination for the MC accelerates, it is likely that the PRC will continue its investment and assistance in maximizing the potential of the MC. While the PRC and Russia share a ‘no-limits’ partnership, Russia’s reaction to its neighbor’s growing influence and power within the former Soviet Union is unclear. This is an acute consideration for Anaklia, which lies near the border with the Russian-occupied territory of Abkhazia. As US companies have previously invested in the Anaklia Port project, the renewed development of MC projects also reinvigorates the opportunities for other foreign stakeholders to invest in the transportation route. This would diversify foreign investments and influence in TITR while also strengthening partnerships and trade in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

Lea Thome is the Schwarzman Fellow at the Wilson Center, affiliated with the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States. She holds a master's degree in Global Affairs as a Schwarzman Scholar from Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. She specializes in China's maritime expansion through ports and bases.