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IN THIS ISSUE:

**PRC at 75: Xi Makes Dour Address While Critics Articulate Bleak Outlook**

*By Arran Hope*.....pp. 2–5

**Understanding the PRC’s Selective Use of Military Hotlines**

*By Jake Rinaldi*.....pp. 6–12

**Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics:**

**PRC Consulate Gray Zone ‘Pop-up’ Events in New York and Beyond**

*By Sze-Fung Lee*.....pp. 13–25

**The Qin Gang Saga Reveals Security Gaps**

*By Matthew Brazil*.....pp. 26–31

**PRC Fertilizer Export Controls Provoke Derisking Abroad**

*By Aya Adachi*.....pp. 32–37

**PRC at 75: Xi Makes Dour Address While Critics Articulate Bleak Outlook**

*By Arran Hope*



Tiananmen Square in darkness during the National Day celebration in 2022. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- Xi Jinping's address on the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) highlighted risks and challenges ahead and included a lengthy segment on unification with Taiwan. The speech was accompanied by relatively muted celebrations on October 1, which passed with minimal fanfare.
- Continuities in the PRC's pitch to the wider world are evident when comparing Xi's address to that of his predecessor Jiang Zemin on the PRC's 50th anniversary, especially regarding the PRC's leadership of the global south and its position as an opponent of the Western-led international order.
- Many voices from inside and outside the PRC have made critical and troubling assessments of the country's current condition. One blog by a prominent PRC-based writer published an article to coincide with the National Day holiday that analogized the current moment to the collapse of the Ming dynasty, echoing critiques that are apparently widespread among other PRC citizens and external observers.

On September 30, at a banquet on the eve of National Day in the People's Republic of China (PRC), President Xi Jinping made a speech to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the nation's founding. As a pre-dinner address, the speech was not intended to be policy-oriented or high on detail. It nevertheless provided a useful barometer for gauging the level of pressure the regime senses it is under. Broodings over “stormy seas (惊涛海浪)” and “preparing for rainy days (未雨绸缪)” suggest that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is aware of the challenges it faces. After 75 years of “bitter struggle (艰苦奋斗),” it is steeling itself for the prospect of more years of the same ([People's Daily](#), October 1).

The speech itself contained four points of note. First, there was a useful reminder that the CCP sees rapid economic development and long-term social stability as the two main pillars of its legitimacy. These Xi refers to early on in his speech as “the two great miracles (两大奇迹).” The problem for Xi is that both factors appear to be running their course. As the Third Plenum in July and the recent Politburo Meeting in September suggest, the Party does not have good answers to the current economic situation ([China Brief](#), July 26; [Xinhua](#), September 26). The PRC meanwhile is turning to increasingly repressive tactics to maintain stability at home, with domestic security budgets ballooning over the last decade ([China Brief](#), [March 12, 2018](#); [March 22, 2019](#); [Nikkei Asia](#), August 29, 2022).

Second was the focus on Chinese-style modernization, which took up a substantial portion of the speech. Xi declared that “comprehensively advancing the building of a strong nation and the rejuvenation of the nation with Chinese-style modernization is the central task of the Party and the country in the new era and new journey (以中国式现代化全面推进强国建设、民族复兴，是新时代新征程党和国家的中心任务).” He also reiterated that the most important way to advance this vision of modernization is “to adhere to the leadership of the CCP.” Xi has increasingly made this the centerpiece of his plans for the PRC, both as a way to chart a course out of the domestic economy's ills and as a model to offer to developing countries. As an article in the Party's theory journal *Qiushi* argued several days before Xi's speech, “recent history has repeatedly proved that modernization cannot be brought about by colonial aggression, nor can it be achieved by copying the Western model ... Chinese-style modernization has provided useful references and lessons for developing countries to realize modernization” ([Qiushi](#), September 26).

Another prominent feature of the speech was the space dedicated to Taiwan. Taiwan is traditionally mentioned in the PRC's National Day speeches, as it remains central to the country's conception of itself. This year, however, a whole paragraph—nearly 10 percent of the entire speech—was dedicated to the topic. Notably, there was no reference to “peace” in cross-strait relations. Xi instead opted for a harder line that played up the biological ties that bind Taiwan inexorably to the PRC. He claimed that “people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are connected by blood (台湾是中国的神圣领土，两岸人民血脉相连、血浓于水),” and that Taiwan is a “sacred territory (神圣领土)” of China's. He also presented reunification as inevitable, avowing that “the wheel of history cannot be stopped by anyone (历史的车轮谁都无法阻挡)!”

The final notable part of the speech, coming shortly before the toast, was an invocation to prepare for “unpredictable risks and challenges (难预料的风险挑战).” Warning that the country “must be prepared for

danger in times of peace (要居安思危)” is not a triumphalist way to close out a speech and suggests a lack of confidence among the leadership. It perhaps goes some way to explain why the events that marked National Day itself were muted. Despite remaining in power for 75 years and outlasting the Soviet Union in the process, the official schedule for the day’s celebrations did not include a military parade or other grand events. Instead, Tiananmen Square and its surroundings were lined with flower beds and national flags, and various banquets and concerts were staged for visiting dignitaries and guests. Some PRC citizens have surmised that the country’s persistent economic problems might have made an expensive display of triumphalism impolitic ([VOA](#), October 1). While it is true that big celebrations tend to follow the rubric of “one small celebration every five years and one big celebration every ten years (五年一小庆，十年一大庆),” an anniversary as significant as the 75th would ordinarily merit more full-throated festivities.

Comparing Xi’s speech to the one Jiang Zemin (江泽民) made in 1999 on the Party’s 50th anniversary accentuates these points, while revealing a high degree of continuity ([Reform Data](#), October 1, 1999). Convictions of the historical inevitability of the PRC’s rise feature in both, as does the certainty that socialism is the only correct model for the country to follow. While many of the specific rhetorical constructs of the Xi era are missing from the earlier speech, Xi echoes Jiang in allying the PRC with the countries of the global south. A quarter of a century ago, Jiang declared that the Chinese people have made unremitting efforts to “oppose hegemonism and promote world multipolarity, to push for the establishment of a just and rational new international political and economic order (反对霸权主义和推进世界多极化，推动建立公正合理的国际政治经济新秩序).” In 2024, this rhetoric might be supplemented by Xi’s three global initiatives, One Belt One Road, and the “community of common destiny,” but the core substance and direction remain the same. Namely, the desire to diminish the influence of the West in the world and promote the PRC’s preferences in its place.

Looking back at Jiang’s speech now, the phrase that most stands out is his announcement that the development of the Chinese nation “has entered a brand-new era (进入了一个崭新的时代).” Xi’s “new era (新时代)” has apparently lost the sheen of Jiang’s “brand-new” one, but it begs the question of how the current moment in the PRC’s politics should be framed. While Xi maintains that the current era—over which he has reigned supreme—is new, other voices have proffered alternative assessments of the PRC’s current condition.

Over the past two years, Western scholars and writers have used various terms to provide general, single-word characterizations of the “new era.” The Australian sinologist Geremie Barmé has framed the era acerbically as “Xi Jinping’s Empire of Tedium” ([China Heritage](#), January 1, 2022). In a post timed for National Day this week, he went a step further, drawing parallels to 1930s Germany to describe the CCP’s agenda as “national socialism” ([China Heritage](#), October 1). Others have referred to the contemporary moment in a similar vein as “Xi’s Age of Stagnation” or “China’s Age of Malaise” ([Foreign Affairs](#), August 22, 2023). Most recently, Carl Minzer has proposed “China’s Age of Counterreform,” describing a period of “increasing internal risks” and “full-blown erosion” in which “the entire political superstructure of the reform era is being undercut” ([Journal of Democracy](#), October).

These are bleak pronouncements, but Chinese voices have provided even more colorful—and sobering—descriptors. In a 2023 WeChat post, the essayist Hu Wenhui (胡文辉) described the period the Chinese people were living through as the “Garbage Time of History (历史的垃圾时间)” ([CDT](#), August 1). Originally referring to sport, “garbage time” is a colloquial term for the period toward the end of a match in which the result is clear and teams simply aim to run down the clock. Hu argues that the PRC is experiencing something similar but at the national level. The term has since resonated, becoming a meme in online discourse used to express exasperation at the state of the economy. What “garbage time” on its own does not make explicit is the sense that a proverbial “final whistle” may be expected in the coming years. This sense of an ending has been put more clearly in a blog post by the writer and social critic Li Chengpeng (李承鹏) (coincidentally a former sportswriter himself).

Li Chengpeng describes the present-day PRC, by way of an analogy with the collapse of the Ming dynasty, as “the era of the sandgrouse (沙鸡时代)” ([Wenxue/Li Chengpeng](#), September 26). At the end of the Ming, Li writes, someone began to sell a kind of sandgrouse, a bird that was native not to Beijing but to somewhere much farther north. According to local legend, the bird usually flies as far south as the capital only when its habitat is disturbed, usually by troop movements on the border. When the birds began to appear, Beijingers had a sense of what the sandgrouse portended, but “no one dared to say it out loud for fear of being killed (但没有人敢说出口, 怕杀头),” and so all they could do was simply continue to trade sandgrouse (只能买卖沙鸡而已).” By labeling the PRC of 2024 as the era of the sandgrouse, Li suggests that the PRC might be reaching its endgame. What Li does not mention, but perhaps fits with his monitory essay, is that the PRC’s founding leader, Mao Zedong, has previously been compared to Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋), the founder and first emperor of the Ming dynasty. By analogizing Xi’s “new era” to that of the Ming’s demise, Li implicitly suggests that the “wheel of history” Xi referred to in his speech is spinning off course.

### **Conclusion**

As the PRC reaches its milestone 75th anniversary, the health of its body politic has come under scrutiny. Official rhetoric from the Party continues to tell a good story, but as Xi Jinping’s speech makes clear, the positive energy of the propaganda messaging is shot through with concerns about the path forward and the risks and challenges that lie ahead. Those darker undercurrents are reflected in the characterizations of the PRC’s predicament articulated by many alternative voices, both inside and outside the country. The two groups have divergent views about the state of the nation, but they appear to concur that, for many Chinese people, this year’s National Day holds little cause for celebration.

*Arran Hope is the editor of China Brief.*

**Understanding the PRC's Selective Use of Military Hotlines**

*By Jake Rinaldi*



Xi Jinping met with representatives of the 78th Group Army officers and soldiers. (Source: [gstheory](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- The PRC's strategic use of and reluctance to establish military hotlines reflect a calculated approach to escalation risk, which can be seen in crises ranging from the accidental bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in 1999 to the present day. There is a recognition that hotlines offer tactical benefits, but they are not viewed as a solution to the broader challenges in US-PRC relations.
- The PRC is largely skeptical of military hotlines, believing that they lack utility and could potentially undermine its national security. Defense scholars fear that the existence of a mechanism to de-escalate crises could embolden adversaries to take more risks, and doubt that hotlines can help mitigate long-term mistrust in bilateral relations.
- Beijing also perceived some benefits of military hotlines. These include enhancing safety and crisis management, enabling the political signaling of intentions, and improving the PRC's reputation as a responsible power, as well as allowing it to control narratives and influence other states' actions.

The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly precarious with the potential for miscalculation between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). A recent call between Admiral Samuel Paparo, Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, and General Wu Yanan (吴亚男), Commander of the PLA Southern Theater Command, marked a positive step toward reestablishing military communication after months of delay ([USINDOPACOM](#), September 9; [Xinhua](#), September 10). This development comes after a long period of strained ties, during which the PRC repeatedly resisted broader military-to-military dialogue, including through established hotlines. Reliable lines of communication are essential to mitigate the risks of serious incidents in the region. A collision between a PRC fighter and a US reconnaissance plane, accidents during military exercises, or US support to an ally in a conflict with the PRC could quickly escalate without real-time dialogue between commanders. The absence of such communication would reduce opportunities for de-escalation and heighten the risk of broader global conflict.

The two sides have taken different approaches to military-to-military dialogue. US military leaders have consistently prioritized opening more channels of communication with PRC counterparts, reflecting the long-standing recognition of their importance across multiple presidential administrations. The PRC has instead demonstrated a pattern of avoiding communication during crises. After the accidental bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in 1999 and the 2001 mid-air collision over Hainan Island, the PRC delayed and then refused engagement with US officials. More recently, the PRC has repeatedly avoided using its established hotline with the Philippines, even in situations where communication could mitigate the risk of escalation. This pattern is not universal, however. For instance, the PRC has agreed to establish a military hotline between the Vietnamese Navy and the PLA Southern Theater Command.

The PRC's strategic use of and reluctance to establish military hotlines reflect a calculated approach to escalation risk. This has implications for US defense planning that necessitate interpreting PRC engagement as an indicator of risk, proposing streamlined and context-specific hotline agreements, and considering innovations like involving PLA political commissars to enhance crisis management.

### **Existing PRC Hotlines**

The PRC has developed a hierarchical system of military hotlines to manage communications and address crises with various nations. These hotlines are categorized into four main levels: presidential, ministerial, service-level, and battalion/brigade. Theater-level hotlines are aspirational and without precedent. Each type of hotline offers unique advantages and faces specific challenges, reflecting the complexities of international military and diplomatic interactions.

At the presidential level, direct communication with top political leadership bypasses intermediary approvals, although it is often encumbered by bureaucratic delays and significant political signaling or politicization. The ministerial-level hotlines are limited by the lack of direct political authority on the PRC side. This is because the current Minister of National Defense, Dong Jun (董军), is not a member of the Central Military Commission. As such, his role consists largely of military diplomacy, with no real decision-making power. In contrast, service-level hotlines with the PLA Navy and Coast Guard, established with the

Philippines and Vietnam, offer awareness of facts on the ground but are encumbered by bureaucratic elements including the dual command system. The above hotlines are generally the most susceptible to political signaling. The battalion/brigade level, with connections such as those with India, provides detailed on-the-ground information during active conflicts but is typically established on an ad hoc basis. There is no record of any combatant or theater commander-level hotline, and it remains largely theoretical in authoritative PRC literature. Moreover, this lack of precedent presents an additional challenge to establishing such a mechanism.

**Table 1: Matrix of PRC Military Hotlines**

Level	Publicized Connections	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Presidential</b>	United States, Philippines, Russia	Direct communication with top political leadership; avoids intermediaries.	Lengthy process due to bureaucratic approval; 48-hour response window; significant political signaling or politicization when publicized.
<b>Ministerial (Defense)</b>	United States, ASEAN, Japan	High-level official contact close to US leadership; facilitates timely communication.	PRC Minister of Defense lacks direct political authority; not part of the Central Military Commission (CMC).
<b>Service (Navy and Coast Guard)</b>	Philippines, Vietnam	Domain-specific with operational knowledge relevant to the crisis.	Lengthy chain of command; often ineffective with failures to respond.
<b>Battalion/Brigade</b>	India	Detailed knowledge of facts on the ground during active conflicts.	Ad hoc nature; established only during conflicts; lacks formalized protocols.
<b>Combatant/Theater</b>	Aspirational	Aims to enhance operational-strategic crisis management.	Largely aspirational; lacks formalized and operational implementation or precedent.

(Source: Author Research)

### **Beijing Perceives Benefits and Costs to Military Hotlines**

#### *Perceived Benefits*

From Beijing’s perspective, military hotlines present several strategic benefits, which are weighed carefully against perceived costs. The PRC first considers the potential for increased safety and communication, particularly at lower echelons where active conflicts may already be occurring. PRC scholars also view hotlines as mechanisms for deepening bilateral relations, positioning them as tools for fostering closer ties with other nations. Additionally, hotlines play an important role in political signaling. The deliberate use—or non-use—of these communication channels can convey Beijing’s satisfaction or displeasure with particular actions or policies, making them a versatile instrument in the PRC’s broader diplomatic and strategic toolkit.

The first perceived benefit of hotlines for Beijing is enhancing safety and crisis management, particularly at lower echelons. This is exemplified by the hotlines along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the PLA and the Indian Armed Forces. The LAC, a 2,100-mile boundary that has seen multiple clashes, now features at least six hotlines at various flashpoints ([The Times of India](#), August 1, 2021). These hotlines allow battalion and brigade-level commanders to communicate immediately during any “irritant” or minor conflict, enabling rapid de-escalation through direct dialogue ([Deccan Herald](#), May 6, 2022).

This approach aligns with analysis of crisis management from PRC scholars. Hu Bo (胡波), Director of the Center for Maritime Strategy Studies at Peking University, notes, “Military communication between front-line units is already guaranteed by a series of international rules or bilateral agreements, and in case of an unexpected event, emergency communication can be established.” [1] The PRC view emphasizes that these brigade-level hotlines are particularly crucial once a crisis has already erupted, underscoring their role as reactive tools in maintaining stability.

The second set of perceived benefits relates to hotlines as political signaling tools. Establishing and using hotlines can serve as a mechanism for Beijing to bolster its international reputation and signal its intentions to other states. According to PRC scholars, one of the motivations behind initiating hotlines is to maintain a favorable international image. Hu Yumin (胡豫闽) and Ma Yingjie (马英杰) from the PLA National Defense University emphasize that “the initial proposals for such agreements were more about preserving self-image and gaining favorable international public opinion.” [2] This signaling function is further evident in the PRC’s approach to its relations with neighboring countries. For instance, the PRC has recently established a hotline with Vietnam, reflecting a desire to deepen bilateral ties as relations remain positive ([Socialist Republic of Vietnam Government News](#), April 12). Conversely, when relations are strained, as is the case currently with the Philippines, the PRC has opted not to respond to calls on the established hotline, using non-engagement as a deliberate form of political signaling ([RFI](#), August 13, 2023).

This strategic use of hotlines—or the refusal to engage via these channels—illustrates the PRC’s intent to control the narrative and influence the actions of other states. For example, after the accidental US bombing of the PRC embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the PRC did not respond to President Clinton’s attempts at communication, signaling its displeasure and asserting its authority. Similarly, following the 2001 mid-air collision over Hainan Island, the PRC delayed communication with US officials for over 12 hours. As Wang Xue (王雪) of Nanjing University’s South China Sea Research Center explains, “China deliberately refuses calls and delays communication to demonstrate resolve and exert pressure to prevent accidental escalation.” [3] This pattern of behavior underscores the broader strategic calculus in which hotlines are not merely tools for crisis management but also instruments of political leverage and signaling, particularly when Beijing seeks to assert its stance over a particular issue or project dissatisfaction.

Given these perceived benefits, some PRC scholars have supported proposals to expand communication channels with the United States. Hu Bo advocates for the establishment of a theater-level hotline between the PRC and the United States. [4] Likewise, Liu Mei (刘美), whose research is supported by funding from the National Social Science Fund, has called for a coast guard hotline between the two countries to manage

maritime security in the South China Sea. [5] Establishing a theater-level hotline remains challenging due to the lack of precedent and existing civil-military challenges. Nevertheless, these recommendations reflect a recognition within PRC academic circles of the need for more robust and direct communication mechanisms to manage potential crises with the United States.

### *Perceived Costs*

The primary obstacle to expanding current US-PRC hotlines is Beijing's prevailing belief that these communication channels lack utility and could potentially undermine its national security. PRC scholars stress that crisis management between great powers is not just about preventing incidents, but also about strategic maneuvering. Hu Bo underscores this when he states, "Of course, major powers involved in crisis management always have dual purposes; preventing maritime incidents is only one aspect. The goal of limiting the adversary at the lowest cost and ensuring the freedom of one's military actions is also a significant concern." [6] Tong Zhao, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Beijing, concurs, asserting PRC leaders fear effective hotlines "could actually embolden perceived American military provocations," especially "close range surveillance activities near China" ([Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#), June 24).

From Beijing's perspective, military hotlines with the United States could enable greater US freedom of maneuver. The United States has conducted freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea, challenging the PRC's territorial claims. Beijing might fear that hotlines could allow the United States to push these operations closer to features claimed by the PRC, emboldened by the existence of a mechanism to de-escalate any resulting crises. Beijing may also view hotlines as a means for the United States to avoid severe repercussions if an incident occurs during airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations. From Beijing's perspective, this safety net could lead to an increase in US ISR missions along the PRC coastline, with the hotline serving as a tool to quickly manage any incidents without halting or scaling back US operations. These examples demonstrate concern in Beijing that the United States might use these hotlines to secure freedom of maneuver while having a safeguard in place to manage and mitigate crises that are caused by perceived US provocations.

The PRC also remains skeptical of the utility of military hotlines, viewing them as insufficient for addressing deeper strategic issues and encumbered by significant bureaucratic and civil-military challenges. As Tong Zhao highlights, PRC military officials are generally reluctant to initiate discussions with US counterparts without explicit authorization from the political leadership ([USIP](#), September 7, 2023; [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#), June 24). The procedural requirements for setting up the calls further complicate rapid communication. The process involves multiple stages: initial notification, agreement to discuss, scheduling, and finally, discussion. Each stage is constrained by bureaucratic approval and the requirement for a 48-hour response window. The only PRC hotline that functions for immediate crisis management (i.e., without the 48-hour protocol) is the PRC-India border hotline at the brigade and battalion level. This cumbersome protocol reflects broader inefficiencies in the hotline system and Beijing's skepticism about their utility. It is possible that streamlining these procedures would enhance the effectiveness of hotlines in real-time crisis management and could even shift Beijing's views on their utility.

Skepticism persists among PRC analysts about the long-term utility of hotlines, who argue that they do not address the deeper, more fundamental issues in bilateral relationships. Hu Yumin and Ma Yingjie assert that “such measures cannot ensure timely resolution of problems, nor can they address the deeper or more fundamental contradictions between both sides.” [8] In the context of US-PRC competition, Beijing perceives Washington’s intermediate strategic aim as achieving “competitive coexistence” and “containment” without outright conflict. [9] Thus, analysts are doubtful that hotlines can mitigate deeper mistrust. Consequently, while hotlines offer tactical benefits, they are not viewed as a solution to the broader challenges in US-PRC relations.

## **Conclusion**

A cost-benefit analysis of Beijing’s perceived risks and costs of military hotlines suggests that the use of and reluctance to establish military hotlines reflect a calculated approach tied directly to its assessment of escalation risk. Beijing’s failure to respond to existing hotlines should therefore be seen as deliberate rather than the result of incompetence. In other words, when Beijing does not respond, it signals that PRC leaders do not see an immediate threat of escalation. Conversely, when they do engage, it indicates they take the situation seriously and fear potential escalation. This analysis underscores the critical importance of recognizing Beijing’s distinct approach to military hotlines, suggesting a need to reassess expectations surrounding their use. A deeper understanding of how the PRC perceives and uses these communication tools can help avoid misinterpretation and ensure more effective crisis management moving forward.

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## **Notes**

[1] Hu Bo, “Challenges and Ways to Improve Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management” [中美海上危机管理面临的困境与改善路径], *American Studies [美国研究]*, vol. 5 (2021), 61-80.

[2] Hu Yumin and Ma Yingjie, “The New Strategic Relationship Between China and America and the Trust Between America and Russia in Nuclear Issues” [中美新型战略核关系与美俄核信任问题研究], *Journal of Ocean University of the PRC*, no. 3 (2017).

[3] Wang Xue, “Mode of Competition, Balance of Interest and Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management” [竞争模式、利益平衡度与中美海上危机管控], *Waijiao Pinglun [外交评论]*, no. 4 (2024), 52-83.

[4] Hu Bo, “Challenges and Ways to Improve Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management.”

[5] Liu Mei, “Demarcation of Marine Military Activities and “Gray Zone” Operations of the United States in the SouthChina Sea” [海上军事活动的界定与美国南海“灰色地带行动”], *Journal of International Security Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2021), 102-160.

[6] Hu Bo, “Challenges and Ways to Improve Sino-US Maritime Crisis Management”

[7] Hu Yumin and Ma Yingjie, “The New Strategic Relationship Between China and America and the Trust Between America and Russia in Nuclear Issues”

[8] Ibid.

[9] Cha Hongyu, The US Biden administration’s crisis management strategy and prospects for China [美国拜登政府对华危机管控策略及前景], *Contemporary International Relations*, no. 6 (2024), 22-41.

**Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics:  
PRC Consulate Gray Zone ‘Pop-up’ Events in New York and Beyond**

*by Sze-Fung Lee*



PRC Consul General in New York Huang Ping (seated, left) and Deputy Consul General Wu Xiaoming (standing, left), conducting a consular service event at an adult day care center in Flushing, New York, on March 12, 2024. (Source: [Consulate General of the PRC in New York](#), March 12)

**Executive Summary**

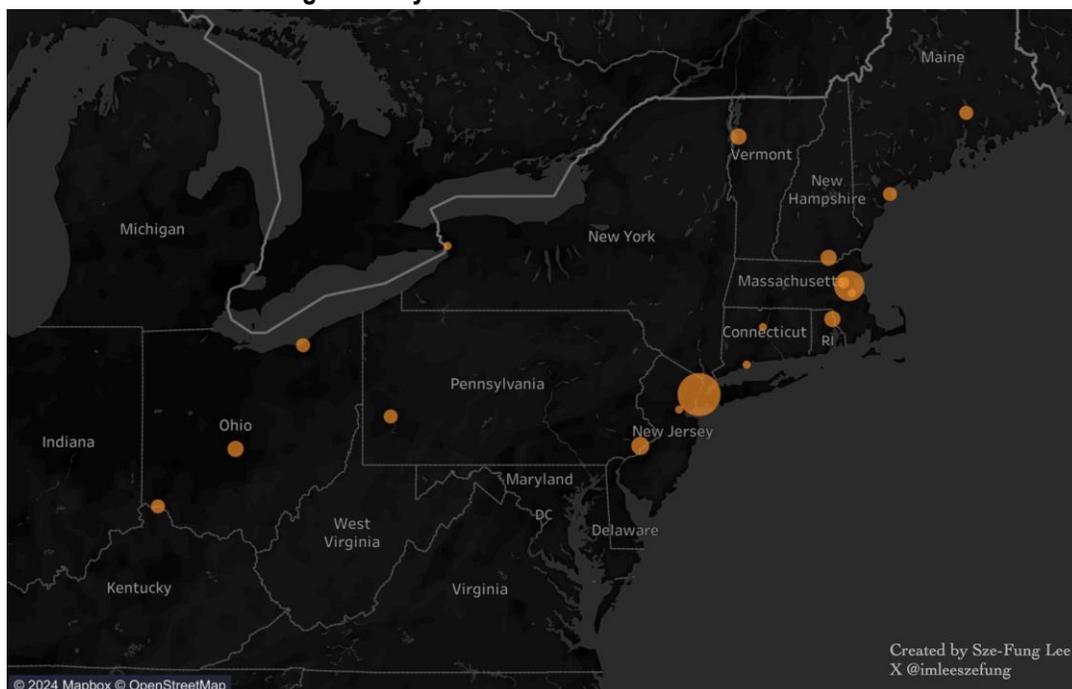
- The Consulates General of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago have been conducting gray zone “pop-up” consular service events across the United States under the initiative “Bringing Consular Services into the Community,” often at non-diplomatic facilities. These events provide consular services such as passport renewals and document processing, but their legality remains questionable due to possible violations of international law.
- Beyond offering basic services, these events likely serve as platforms for the PRC’s broader political influence operations, potentially gathering intelligence on Chinese diaspora communities and mobilizing them for future operations, including political activities. The events have been co-hosted by community organizations with links to the CCP’s united front system, raising concerns about data handling and surveillance.
- The events may also align with the PRC’s broader strategy of influence and electoral interference in the United States, targeting districts with substantial Chinese American populations and potentially mobilizing community support for specific candidates and political agendas.

**Editor's note: This article is the first in a two-part series. The second part will appear in the next issue of China Brief, published in two weeks' time, and will focus on consular "pop-up" events as vectors for political influence and propaganda campaigns on behalf of the Party.**

Consulates General of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago have been organizing a series of gray zone events providing consular services in the form of "pop-ups" at non-designated diplomatic facilities across the United States. [1] Under an initiative referred to as "Bringing Consular Services into the Community (领事服务进社区)," these events typically last anywhere from a few hours to a full day and offer services such as passport renewal and the issuing of travel documents to PRC citizens. Over 90 have been hosted across the country, with more than 80 organized by the New York consulate, which has run events in 15 cities across seven states since 2016. The venues for these events are wide-ranging. Some have taken place in clubhouses, university classrooms, and elderly centers, while others have been hosted in the offices of community associations. Even shopping malls and restaurants have been used to provide consular services. [2]

The legality of the pop-ups is unclear. Since the venues for these events are not located at designated facilities that enjoy extraterritorial protections for providing consular services, the PRC would likely have to have received the consent of the US Government to conduct them. If they were not accredited by the host country, Beijing is likely violating international law. [3] Even if these events have been authorized by the US Government, the evidence suggests that they have exceeded the remit of providing consular services by also providing platforms for political activities. It is also possible that these events have enabled the PRC to conduct influence operations (IOs) and lay the groundwork for electoral influence and other activities while strengthening their capacity for overseas political mobilization.

**Figure 1: The distribution map of the locations of pop-up events from 2016 to 2024. This map only includes events organized by the PRC Consulate General in New York.**



(Source: Author)

These apparently innocuous events can be seen as part of a broader strategy by the PRC that uses gray zone tactics to disrupt existing diplomatic and legal practices and create new norms. The increase in frequency of events under this consular initiative indicates a gradual institutionalization and intensification of the PRC's preexisting extraterritorial law enforcement efforts. Like other gray zone operations conducted by the PRC, these consular services events challenge the international rules-based order but do so under the threshold that would provoke major diplomatic retaliation. This is crucial to the PRC's hybrid warfare strategies.

### **Eight Years of Community Penetration**

In the United States, there are five recognized traditional PRC foreign missions. These are the PRC Embassy, located in Washington, DC, and four recognized consulates in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles ([US Department of State](#), May 21, 2021). Over the last eight years, the PRC's consulates have made efforts to engage with local Chinese diaspora communities under an initiative called "Bringing Consular Services into the Community (领事服务进社区)."

The New York Consulate General has apparently been a pioneer of these pop-up events. In 2024 alone, it has hosted at least 27 events in various parts of New York City, Boston (Massachusetts), Philadelphia and Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), Cleveland and Cincinnati (Ohio), Pawtucket (Rhode Island), and Metuchen and Cedar Knolls (New Jersey) (see Appendix, Table 1). The events themselves have taken place in venues that range from clubhouses, university classrooms, and elderly centers, to associations' offices, shopping malls, and restaurants. The first pop-up event in 2024 took place at an adult day care center in Flushing, New York, on March 12. At the session, PRC Consul General Huang Ping (黄屏), and his deputy Wu Xiaoming (吴晓明), personally processed passport applications, renewals, and "overseas residents pension qualification verifications" for overseas Chinese (PRC Consulate General in New York; [March 6](#), [March 12](#)). From April 15–20, 2024, Deputy Consul General Wu Xiaoming (吴晓明) also led a working group from the New York consulate that hosted four sessions providing consular services for PRC nationals. These took place in New York, Ohio (2 days), and Pennsylvania. The events took place in a University classroom, the Union Center Pavilion, a retirement home, and a Chinese restaurant, respectively ([PRC Consulate General in New York](#), April 9).

The initiative "Bringing Consular Services into the Community" under which these events have taken place appears to date back as early as January 2016. The official name of the first documented "consular service" event was "Bringing Services to the Overseas Chinese Association (送服务进侨团)." During that event, former PRC Consul General in New York Zhang Qiyue (章启月) led a team in Brooklyn providing on-site services for overseas Chinese. These included pension audit verification applications, and both consultations on and applications for passports and visas ([WeChat/PRC Consulate General in New York](#), January 25, 2016). In February 2017, the New York consulate launched "consular services month." Spanning February 7–April 8, this involved a series of 30 "Bringing Consular Services into the Community" events organized with the help of 19 "overseas Chinese cooperation associations (合作侨团)" and over 300 "volunteers (志愿者)" ([WeChat/PRC Consulate General in New York](#), April 21, 2017).

The success of these early events has led the consulate to host pop-up events with more regularity. As it has done so, the scope of the services provided has expanded. Now, beyond services catering to retired PRC citizens such as the “overseas residents pension qualification verification” application, more formal consular services such as passport renewal and the issuing of travel documents are also offered to PRC nationals more generally. The services have also expanded in scale, taking place across a number of different states within the New York consulate’s consular district ([PRC Embassy to the United States](#), June 29).

**Figure 2: Deputy Consulate General Wu Xiaoming at the consular service pop-up event in a classroom in Capen Hall at the State University of New York at Buffalo on April 20.**



(Source: [PRC Consulate General in New York](#), April 22)

### **Pop-Ups Align with Party Policies**

The motivations for the initiative can be traced back to Party documents and high-level speeches. This includes directives found in the work reports CCP Chairman Xi Jinping delivered to the 19th and 20th Party Congresses that have sought to enhance the well-being of and strengthen ties with overseas Chinese communities ([Xinhua](#), October 27, 2017; [Gov.cn](#), October 25, 2022). The initiative is also a manifestation of the concept of “people-centered diplomacy (外交为民)” ([PRC Consulate-General in Chicago](#), March 3, 2017; [Xinhua](#), December 9, 2023). As articulated by Xi, people-centered diplomacy entails “actively expanding the work of overseas Chinese affairs,” “safeguarding the security, legitimate rights, and interests of overseas Chinese,” and making Chinese citizens “feel the strength and the warmth of their motherland, as well the dignity and honor of being Chinese (让中国公民在世界各地都能感受到祖国的力量与温暖, 感受到中国人的尊严与荣耀)” no matter where they are ([People’s Daily](#), December 30, 2023; [China’s Diplomacy in the New Era](#), accessed July 9).

In addition to PRC consulates, the main bodies tasked with executing the initiative are associations and “volunteers” affiliated with the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC)—organizations that are central to CCP strategies targeting the Chinese diaspora. [4] According to Party literature, united front strategies include “using the legal to mask the illegal (利用合法掩护非法, 合法与非法巧妙结合)” and other principles such as building networks for “nestling intelligence within the united front (寓情报于统战中)” and “using the united front to drive intelligence (以统战带动情报)” ([People’s Daily](#), November 18, 2020).

It follows from this that PRC officials and affiliated organizations may be using the pop-up events for more than their explicit function of providing consular services. Namely, the events could serve as cover for expanded influence operations (IOs) within Chinese American communities. For the PRC, pop-ups offer several benefits. By actively going into local communities, the consulates can reach many more people than they would by only providing services within their designated consular offices. This is especially the case for people who might hesitate to visit a consulate due to the prospect of long-distance travel or the non-urgent status of renewing documentation (if, for instance, that person has no plans to travel overseas). The pop-ups also seem to fly under the radar of local law enforcement, which allows them to operate with relative freedom. They are cost-effective, too, as they leverage the capacity of the consulates’ cohorts, which are usually CCP-affiliated organizations. Cohosting with community organizations also provides the PRC with direct access into the communities themselves.

There are several ways in which these pop-ups might provide opportunities for gathering intelligence on diaspora communities in the United States. An explicit feature of the events is to process documents and applications for documents for PRC citizens. The extensive reach into local communities that they provide enables the PRC government to gather personal data and information on overseas citizens much more effectively than do other events, such as gatherings or rallies organized by overseas Chinese cooperation associations or cultural and business organizations. Personal information might include people’s immigration status—for instance, what visa they might be on, whether they are permanent residents, or if they are American citizens. This information is useful to the PRC, as it can be used, among other things, to identify



The pop-ups could also provide an avenue for the PRC to shape the domestic politics of the United States in ways that align with its own interests. Cross-referencing the precise addresses of nearly all of the pop-ups with electoral district maps indicates two things. First, pop-ups tend to occur in constituencies that are home to substantial Chinese American populations. Second, they tend to occur in separate constituencies. For instance, of the 11 sessions hosted in New York State between March and July 2024, most were hosted in distinct congressional, senate, and assembly districts. The only exception was the city's Chinatown, a constituency with a large Chinese American population, where three of the events were hosted. This suggests that the pop-ups could provide a basis for mobilizing people to support specific candidates running for seats at various levels of government (See Appendix, Table 2).

### **Pop-up Cohosts' Links to the Party-State**

The consulates general usually cohost pop-up events alongside local community organizations. The Fujian Association In USA (美国福建会馆), for instance, often provides support for the New York consulate's events. According to an announcement by the consulate, an event on May 9 was hosted at the association's address, though the name of the association itself was not included ([PRC Consulate General in New York](#), May 1). [3] The involvement of this association's members can be confirmed, however, by identifying them in photos from the event ([World Journal](#), May 14; [The USA Hall of Fame](#), May 14).

Many of these organizations already have links to the united front system. The Fujian Association In USA allegedly has ties with the Fujian Province Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (福建省归国华侨联合会), a provincial-level branch of ACFROC. The association's president, Chen Zhao-yin (陈昭银), led a delegation to visit municipal-level ACFROC in Fuzhou in April 2023 where they met with Lin Gaoxing (林高星), a PRC official who is also the chairman of the Fuzhou Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese ([Chinaqw](#), April 20, 2023). [5]

Organizations that have participated in the pop-ups have also engaged in election-related activities in the United States. For example, on March 22, 2023, the New York-based American Association of Cantonese (纽约广府人总会) co-hosted a session endorsing Susan Zhuang (庄文怡), a city council candidate for Brooklyn's 43rd District. At the event—one of two held in early 2023 for this purpose—the organizers claimed that they would be “sending a team of volunteers to help her win the final victory (将派出义工团助选她赢得 ... 最终胜利)” in the election ([US China Press](#), July 31, 2023). The association, as well as its president Luo Shaoling (罗少领), appears to have a close relationship with entities affiliated with the PRC Party-state. In November 2023, the group led a delegation to meet with Li Feng (李丰), the chairman and Party secretary of the Guangdong Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, a CCP organization that is part of the united front system ([Guangdong Province Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese](#), November 23, 2023).

These organizations have also engaged in other activities that align with the interests of the CCP and the objectives of the united front. In August 2023, for instance, the Fujian Association In USA organized a protest against the visit of the then-Vice President of Taiwan Lai Ching-te (赖清德) to New York ([US China Press](#), August 14, 2023).

Figure 5: Consular service pop-up event at the Fujian Association in USA in New York on May 9



(Source: [The USA Hall of Fame](#), May 14)

Figure 6: The Fujian Association in USA (美国福建会馆) participates in a counterprotest against the visit of the then-Vice President of Taiwan Lai Ching-Te to New York on August 13, 2023



(Source: [US China Press](#), August 14, 2023)

Other organizations that participate in the pop-ups are affiliated with Beijing's Ministry of Public Security (MPS). For example, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) in April 2023 charged two men with "conspiring to act as agents of the PRC government as well as obstructing justice by destroying evidence of their communications with an MPS official" ([US Department of Justice](#), April 17, 2023). One of the men, Lu Jian-wang (卢建旺), is co-president of the Fukien Benevolent Association of America (福建同乡会). According to the DOJ's press release, Lu was acting under the direction and control of the MPS official and helped open and operate the first known overseas police station in the United States on behalf of the Fuzhou branch of the MPS. On March 12, 2024, long after the charges were made, the Fukien Benevolent Association of America participated in a "Bringing Consular Services into the Community" event organized by the New York consulate.

### **Conclusion**

The PRC's consulates general in the United States have, for at least eight years, run pop-up events across the country that appear to contravene either international law, US domestic law, or both. It is unclear whether the consulates have received approval from the US Department of State to run these events. Even if they have done so, any authorization would strictly be limited to the provision of consular services. It appears, however, that the pop-up events, which tend to be co-hosted with organizations with links to the CCP and its united front system, have also served political purposes.

These irregular activities may serve as peacetime united front operations to advance overseas political mobilization capabilities. While the effectiveness of the events as opportunities for intelligence gathering is unclear, these pop-up events enable the PRC to strengthen ties with overseas Chinese communities. In doing so, they can explore approaches to better coordinate and mobilize for future operations—including kinetic operations—all in the name of "diplomacy for the people."

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### **Notes**

[1] A note on methodology. This report leverages Open-Source Intelligence techniques (OSINT), examining publicly available data from websites and social media platforms collected between January 1, 2016, and September 7, 2024. A combination of social media monitoring and off-the-shelf tools were used to collect publicly available data for the case studies. This timeframe was selected to capture the most relevant case studies since the launch of the initiative. Analysis of the collected data identifies strategies deployed, trends and patterns, and attributions of the influence operations.

[2] The full list of events organized by the PRC Consulates General in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and more from 2016 to 2024 may be shared upon request to the author.

[3] The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations states that “the prior express consent of the receiving State shall also be required for the opening of an office forming part of an existing consular post elsewhere than at the seat thereof” ([International Law Commission](#), 2005).

[4] ACFROC is the principal united front organization that is tasked with influencing ethnic Chinese overseas. See Joske, Alex. (2020). “The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system.” Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Available at: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>.

[5] Lin appears to be also the former Deputy Director of the Fuzhou Municipal Bureau of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (福州市工业和信息化局副局长) and Deputy County Mayor of the Luoyuan County People’s Government (罗源县人民政府副县长). PRC official sources do not provide photos of him, so we have not been able to confirm that this is the same person (Fuzhou Government, [July 24, 2014](#); [September 3, 2021](#)).

**Appendix**

**Table 1: List of Venues for Events organized by the PRC Consulate General in New York, 2024**

Date & Time	State	City	Address/ Entity	Venue Type
September 7	New Hampshire	Nashua	295 Daniel Webster Hwy	Unknown
September 1	Vermont	Burlington	Zen Garden (御园)	Chinese restaurant
August 30	Maine	Bangor	Bangor Chinese School (中国语言文化中心)	Association/ Organization
July 13	New York	New York	Jiayi Elderly Center (嘉怡老人中心园)	Elderly Center
May 26	Massachusetts	Boston	152 Arlington St.	Unknown
May 25	Massachusetts	Boston	Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center (贝尔蒙特老年活动中心)	Elderly Center
May 18	New York	New York (Staten Island)	1727 Richmond Rd	Unknown
May 11	New York	New York	Orange County Chinese Association (OCCA) (橙郡华人协会)	Association/ Organization
May 9	New York	New York	Fujian Association in USA (美国福建会馆)	Association/ Organization
May 8	New York	New York	San Kiang Charitable Association (纽约三慈善会所)	Association/ Organization
April 24	New York	New York	Chinatown East Broadway Mall (唐人街新怡东商场)	Shopping Mall
April 21	New Jersey	Cedar Knolls	Cedar Knolls Adult Medical Day Center (雪松中心)	Adult Medical Day Center
April 20	New Jersey	Metuchen	Mandarin Academy of Metuchen	School/ University
April 20	New York	Buffalo	The State University of New York at Buffalo (纽约州立大学布法罗分校)	School/ University
April 18	Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh	Szechuan Spice (蜀香园餐厅)	Chinese restaurant
April 17	Ohio	Cleveland	St. Clair Place (老年公寓)	Senior Apartment

## ChinaBrief • Volume 24 • Issue 19 • October 4, 2024

April 15	Ohio	Cincinnati	Union Center Pavilion	Union Center Pavilion
April 14	Connecticut	West Hartford	Solomon Schechter Day School	School/ University
April 14	Connecticut	Milford	Wudang Kungfu Academy	Association/ Clubhouse
April 13	Rhode Island	Pawtucket	Rhode Island Association of Chinese Americans (罗德岛华人协会会所)	Association/ Clubhouse
April 07	Massachusetts	Boston	Chinese Progressive Association (波士顿华人前进会会所园)	Association/ Organization
April 06	Massachusetts	Boston	Wong's Family Association in Boston (波士顿黄氏宗亲会所)	Association/ Organization
March 29	New York	New York	Health Essential Association (华人健康协会)	Association/ Organization
March 25	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Friends Senior Care Center (费城华埠好朋友老人活动中心)	Elderly Center
March 14	New York	New York	Songbai Building (松柏大厦)	/
March 13	New York	New York	Da Pingguo Senior Center (大苹果老人中心)	Elderly Center
March 12	New York	New York	Da Diguu Adult Care Center (法拉盛大帝国成人日间活动中心)	Adult Day Care Center

(Source: Author research)

**Table 2: Locations of pop-up events in New York State, 2024**

Date	Venue	Congressional District	Senate District	Assembly District
July 13	Jiayi Elderly Center (嘉怡老人中心)	10	17	49
May 18	1727 Richmond Rd, Staten Island	11	24	64
May 11	Orange County Chinese Association (OCCA) (橙郡华人协会)	18	42	98
May 9	Fujian Association in USA (美国福建会馆)	6	16	40
May 8	San Kiang Charitable Association (纽约三江慈善公所会所)	10	27	65
April 24	Chinatown East Broadway Mall (唐人街新怡东商场)	10	27	65
April 20	State University of New York at Buffalo (纽约州立大学布法罗分校)	26	61	146
March 29	Health Essential Association (华人健康学会)	11	17	47
March 14	Songbai Buiding (松柏大厦)	10	27	65
March 13	Da Pingguo Senior Center (大苹果老人中心)	10	22	49
March 12	Da Diguu Adult Care Center	6	16	25

(Source: [NYS Elected official District 2022](#), Accessed Sept 19)

## The Qin Gang Saga Reveals Security Gaps

*By Matthew Brazil*



The World Affairs Bookstore, Beijing. (Source: [ishizhi.cn](http://ishizhi.cn))

### Executive Summary:

- In June 2023, Qin Gang, the former foreign minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC), mysteriously disappeared, with rumors speculating torture and execution. Recent reports suggest that he remains alive and has been demoted to a deputy director position at World Affairs Press under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Qin's downfall is reportedly linked to his extramarital affair with former Phoenix TV host Fu Xiaotian, raising significant security concerns about the potential exposure of Chinese state secrets to foreign governments. Fu's whereabouts also remain unknown, further adding intrigue to the scandal.
- This high-profile case highlights ongoing security gaps within the PRC's political elite, particularly within its overseas assets. It underscores the broader issue of the Chinese Communist Party's struggles with internal discipline, surveillance of diplomats, and potential foreign intelligence compromises.

In June 2023, then-Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Qin Gang (秦刚) disappeared from public view. Speculation about his fate ensued, including rumors of torture and execution for being a Western spy. This year, however, reports have trickled out indicating that he remains alive and an active, if demoted, member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The first signs of leniency emerged months ago. Qin was referred to as “comrade” and allowed to resign, rather than be expelled, from his seats at the National People's Congress in February and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee in July ([Xinhua](#), February 27; [Gov.cn](#), July 18). In late August, Western outlets including Intelligence Online and *The Washington Post* cited unnamed sources to report that the deposed minister was now a deputy director at World Affairs Press, a publishing arm under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Qin's career work unit ([Intelligence Online](#), 28 August; [The Washington Post](#), 8 September).

If Qin is working at World Affairs Press, it appears to be a state secret, albeit an open one. The organization's “Company Leadership (公司领导)” page shows only two deputy directors, Yan Nan (闫楠) and Gu Yu (谷雨) ([World Affairs Press](#), accessed September 30). No page on the site includes Qin Gang, even those with photos of employee gatherings ([World Affairs Press](#), accessed September 30). A reporter for *The Washington Post* who visited the World Affairs Bookshop in August was told by staff that they had not heard of Qin Gang being one of their own ([The Washington Post](#), 8 September).

### **Affairs at the Heart of the Disappearance**

Soon after the Qin saga began, the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, citing unnamed sources, reported that the erstwhile foreign minister's troubles were rooted in his affair and surrogate child with Fu Xiaotian (傅晓田), now also among the disappeared ([Wall Street Journal](#), September 19, 2023; [Financial Times](#), September 26, 2023). Ms. Fu was formerly a prominent host on the Phoenix Television Network (凤凰卫视), where she headed its “Talk with World Leaders (风云对话),” a bilingual broadcast in English and Chinese. On the program, Fu interviewed prominent individuals such as former UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon, the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, former US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the Syrian dictator Bashar Al Assad. She also interviewed Qin Gang during his tenure as the PRC's ambassador to the United States (July 27, 2021–January 5, 2023).

Fu's interviews are still prominently featured on the “Talk With World Leaders” YouTube channel, overshadowing those of her successor, Nancie Zhu ([Youtube/TalkWithWorldLeaders](#), accessed September 30; [Youtube/Nancie Zhu 朱梓潼](#), April 8). Her interview with Qin Gang remains available ([Youtube/凤凰专区 Phoenix zone](#), April 12, 2022). Remarkably, a page on the website of the PRC Embassy in Washington, DC still records that the interview took place and links to the page on Phoenix Television's website that previously published the interview (now taken down) ([PRC Embassy to the United States](#), March 24, 2022). This could suggest that she has maintained some form of powerful backing.

The pair reportedly met in London in 2010 while Qin was posted there as the PRC's envoy to the United Kingdom, before becoming intimate on his return to Beijing. Later, while Qin served as the PRC's ambassador to the United States, various sources have reported that Ms. Fu ensconced herself and her new baby in a large house in the small but well-heeled Southern California town of Newport Coast ([SpyTalk](#), July 20, 2023). The house, with nine bathrooms and eight bedrooms, rented for over \$48,000 per month at the time, according to Zillow. This is unsurprising, given her apparent wealth. In 2016, while living in the United Kingdom, Fu provided a "series of generous gifts" to Cambridge University's Churchill College, where she completed a graduate degree in education in 2007 ([Churchill College](#), June 10, 2016; [Youtube/Churchill College, University of Cambridge](#), July 6, 2016). In recognition of her donations, the college, which would not disclose the value of the gifts, named a garden after her ([Churchill College](#), accessed September 30). Fu may or may not have survived this affair, but her X (formerly Twitter) account lives on, where she posted about her glamorous lifestyle until April 2023 ([X/Fu Xiaotian 傅曉田](#), accessed September 30). Fu's open declaration of her wealth culminated in early 2023 with what many observers interpreted as very public hints on WeChat and Twitter that her new baby was fathered by Qin Gang, though any affair between the two remains unconfirmed ([X/Fu Xiaotian 傅曉田](#), April 10, 2023).

Extramarital affairs are not uncommon among the CCP elite, but punishment varies depending on their rank. Professor Tomohiko Taniguchi of Tsukuba University, formerly an adviser to the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and a councillor in Japan's Cabinet Secretariat, suggested in an interview that if they "lived a life of ostentation and luxury abroad, highly visible to ordinary Chinese citizens, then the more senior their positions in the Party and government, the more likely they would become targets of punitive sanctions" (Author interview, September 29). Taniguchi suggested that is also possible that Qin and Fu could be punished in order to "set a deterrent example."

### **Qin Not the First Potentially Compromised PRC Diplomat**

The Qin-Fu matter raised glaring security concerns. It is possible that US and other Western observers had also seen the public social media posts that alluded to the extramarital liaison. If so, then it is also possible that the FBI could have compromised Qin Gang or Fu Xiaotian, or both. The apparent degree of openness of the relationship makes it hard to believe that Qin's comrades in the PRC embassy in Washington did not report it to their own security authorities, particularly those right on the spot—the embassy's security office and State Security and Public Security liaison officers stationed there.

The disappearance of Qin Gang and his telegenic paramour and her child, likely for investigation, "shows limited institutional learning by both the MFA and [Ministry of State Security (MSS)]," a security analyst based in East Asia told *China Brief* (Author Interview, September 28). Two prior known cases of compromise also involved a PRC envoy. In 2014, then-PRC ambassador to Iceland Ma Jisheng (马继生) disappeared for six months along with his spouse, after which he was arrested by the MSS for leaking state secrets to Japan ([The Guardian](#), September 17, 2014; [Baidu Baike/马继生](#), accessed September 30). (Ma previously had been stationed in Japan in 1991–1995 and 2004–2008 ([BBC News Chinese](#), September 14, 2014).) In December 2006, PRC ambassador to South Korea Li Bin (李滨) was arrested for relaying information to his

host government about a visit to the PRC by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il ([IntelNews](#), September 18, 2014; [Baidu Baike/李滨](#), accessed September 30). The security analyst, who requested anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue, added that “political appointments in any authoritarian regime are an extension of the leader’s will.” As such, the leader’s unquestioned decisions can interfere with any process to identify potential risk factors, they said. [1] Another analyst, Stephan Blancke, an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Service Institute who also writes for Intelligence Online, commented that “the more authoritarian a system becomes, the more corrupt and mafia-like it becomes” (Author interview, October 4).

### **PRC Lessons from the Qin Case**

The Qin-Fu case presents an opportunity for the MSS and other agencies that may be conducting investigations to audit the security of the PRC’s overseas assets. Such examinations would logically extend to clandestine State Security stations abroad under non-official cover, United Front Work Department offices, and the “overseas police stations” run by the PRC’s Public Security Bureaus ([China Brief](#), June 11, 2023).

Beyond a simple investigation, the Party-state’s response could more closely resemble a purge. This would indicate that long-term problems in the system remain unaddressed, including, Professor Taniguchi notes, “a political culture that dictates that one must display acquired wealth.” Such a comprehensive effort to investigate or purge relevant organs is for now only speculation. Rumors that Fu Xiaotian was being used in a CCP elite political gambit to take down Qin Gang and embarrass General Secretary Xi Jinping, for example, also remain unsubstantiated.

A separate response could involve developing a system to detect insider threats. In the early decades of the PRC, diplomats were not allowed to meet with foreigners alone and instead were accompanied by members of staff who would watch the principal and keep tabs on each other (State Security operatives under diplomatic or other cover may be an exception). According to a European former official, the PRC has reverted to this playbook in recent years. Internal surveillance systems need not be confined to such overt, human resource-intensive methods, however.

A related system has been developed by the MFA to monitor private PRC companies operating overseas. On September 27, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) broke the story of a mobile phone app developed by the MFA called “Safe Silk Road Network (平安丝路网),” which is being foisted upon Chinese enterprises participating in the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative ([ASPI](#), September 27). The “Safe Silk Road Network (平安丝路网)” began operation in September 2017, carrying news of security concerns in countries where Chinese companies are active ([Safe Silk Road Network](#), accessed September 30; [ksrmtzx.com](#), July 8). The platform somewhat resembles US, Australian, and other efforts, such as the US State Department’s Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), its Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), and Canberra’s Smartraveller ([OSAC](#), February 8, 2019; [STEP](#), accessed September 30; [Smartraveller](#), accessed September 30). ASPI’s research shows that the PRC platform goes further than its Western analogues, however. Unlike these other programs, “Safe Silk Road” is not public facing, it is tailored specifically for OBOR companies, and—most importantly—it asks for and in some cases requires detailed information about the companies’ own activities and local conditions rather than just offering helpful security

tips. It is possible that the MFA could engineer a similar system to keep tabs on those in its direct line of service.

### **Conclusion**

There has been some detail, if scant, about Qin Gang since he disappeared. Two things make it seem possible that Qin Gang has been spared in body, if not in career. First, as noted above, he has been officially referred to as “comrade,” indicating he lives, breathes, and has been cleared of any serious charges such as espionage. Second, while there is no exact precedent for Qin’s predicament, there is precedent in CCP history for the great leader to spare a personal favorite who has committed a less-than-mortal sin. Mao did so in 1946–47, removing Kang Sheng (康生) as leader of CCP Intelligence for his excesses during the Rectification and Salvation Campaigns of 1942–44 and exiling him from the Party center for a decade, but giving him a job in Shandong Province. Mao also spared Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, returning him to power eight years later, if only temporarily.

Nothing has been confirmed about Fu Xiaotian, however. The total lack of evidence—or even information—about Ms. Fu leaves open other possibilities. The sanguine look in the selfie she posted just before departing Los Angeles on a private jet does not appear to be one of a woman knowingly returning to face the music of the dictatorship of the proletariat ([X/Fu Xiaotian 傅曉田](#), April 10). Of the many rumored motivations for her behavior, she could just as well be a female Yurchenko, loyal to the PRC throughout while manipulating the opposition. [2] In any case, as pointed out by Nicholas Eftimiades, author of two books on CCP espionage, “if Fu was cooperating with a foreign intelligence service, she was an idiot to get on that plane” (Author interview, September 29).

Concrete answers remain elusive, exacerbated by the PRC regime’s tight control over information. Partial truths about Qin Gang, Fu Xiaotian, and Fu’s child, if they ever emerge, will only do so with time. A complete account will need to await the possible, but unimaginable, opening sometime in the future of Beijing’s archives, perhaps only when hell freezes over.

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*in the Handbook of Asian Intelligence Cultures (2022). His next book concerns Beijing's contemporary worldwide espionage and influence offensive.*

## Notes

[1] Other nations are not immune to such problems, including the United States. Recent scandals in Washington, DC include a retired ambassador and a former DIA senior analyst who both spied for Cuba ([Youtube/60 Minutes](#), May 21), and infamous cases involving officers or former officials of the FBI and the CIA, to name just a few ([BBC](#), June 5, 2023; [Youtube/Philip Thompson](#), April 11).

[2] Vitaly Sergeyevich Yurchenko (b. May 2, 1936) is a former high-ranking KGB disinformation officer. In 1985, he defected to the United States, but later redefected back to the Soviet Union that same year.

## PRC Fertilizer Export Controls Provoke Derisking Abroad

*By Aya Adachi*



Shandong Hualu Hengsheng 300,000 tons/year synthetic ammonia expansion phase I project. (Source: [The Paper](#))

### **Executive Summary:**

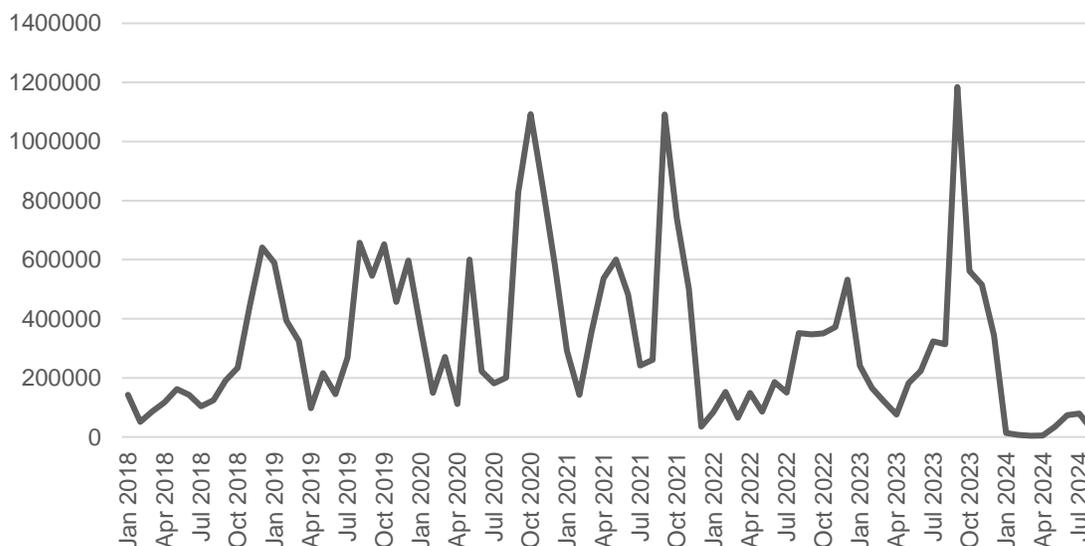
- In June 2024, the People's Republic of China (PRC) introduced additional restrictions on fertilizer exports, sharply reducing urea exports by 83 percent compared to the previous year. This move aims to stabilize domestic prices and safeguard food security, but has disrupted global fertilizer supplies, prompting countries like India and South Korea to seek alternative suppliers.
- The PRC's export controls exacerbate an already strained global fertilizer market, which has been impacted by geopolitical tensions, including sanctions on Russia and Belarus, and logistical challenges like disrupted shipping routes. These issues have increased global food security risks, making stable fertilizer supplies a priority in international forums like the G7.
- PRC regulations are transforming its fertilizer industry to reduce carbon emissions and enhance sustainability. This has led to a reduction in overall fertilizer production, though PRC firms continue to invest in research and development to increase efficiency. Strategic overseas investments in fertilizer production, such as in India and Zambia, also reflect the PRC's commitment to diversifying supply and reducing environmental impact.

- As the PRC reduces its fertilizer exports and focuses on self-sufficiency, countries are diversifying their fertilizer sources. Regions such as Africa, West Asia, and Russia are expected to increase fertilizer production, reshaping the global market and enhancing resilience in agricultural supply chains amid ongoing uncertainties.

In June 2024, the People's Republic of China (PRC) introduced fresh restrictions on its fertilizer exports, impacting global food and fertilizer supply ([Bloomberg](#), June 24, [Sina.com.cn](#), July 12). PRC Customs data show that urea fertilizer exports, which have been particularly low all year, dropped sharply following the imposition of controls. Only 105,000 metric tons were exported in July and August, down from 637,000 metric tons in the same period last year ([General Administration of the PRC \[GACC\]](#), accessed October 1). Urea exports are seasonal and usually increase in August and peak in September. The government's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) has taken the decision to restrict exports several times since 2021 to stabilize domestic prices and safeguard the country's domestic food security ([NDRC](#), July 30, 2021; [GACC](#), October 11 2021; [Reuters](#), September 8, 2023).

The PRC plays an outsized role in the global fertilizer market. In 2023, it accounted for 24 percent of worldwide consumption and 75 percent in East Asia ([International Fertilizer Association \[IFA\]](#), August 20). This means that the PRC's decisions as a key producer of urea and phosphate-based fertilizer can have a major impact on international trade. As a result, many of its Asian trade partners—including South Korea and India—have reconsidered their reliance on PRC fertilizers, turning instead to alternative suppliers ([Business Korea](#), September 11; [Reuters](#), December 18, 2023).

Figure 1: Monthly Urea Exports 2018–2024 (metric tons)



(Source: Author, based on GACC data)

### Geopolitical Risks Have Enhanced Food Security Focus

The PRC's export controls have been introduced during a period in which the global fertilizer market is increasingly strained by a host of geopolitical and logistical issues. The war in Ukraine has had a profound impact, as Russia and Belarus, two key exporters of fertilizers as well as the oil and gas that is essential for

energy-intensive fertilizer production, have faced sanctions and disrupted export routes ([IFA](#), August 20). Global shipping has also been hampered by conflict in the Red Sea and low water levels in the Panama Canal, making it increasingly difficult for countries to secure reliable fertilizer supplies ([IFA](#), August 20; [IFPRI](#), March 21). [1]

Stable fertilizer supply has been prominent in several international policy discussions, as has broader food security. Both were on the agenda of the two most recent G7 summits, held in Italy and Japan, indicating the importance G7 leaders accord to the critical role fertilizers play in maintaining global agricultural productivity ([G7](#), June 14; [G7](#), May 20 2023). While some of these issues have been partially resolved in recent months, traders remain wary due to elevated risks and rising insurance costs ([IFA](#), August 20).

The PRC faces growing domestic challenges to its food security, despite its substantial food reserves. Soil degradation, pollution, and issues with freshwater supplies have contributed to a decline in arable land, which shrank to 1.28 million square kilometers by 2019, a nearly 6 percent decrease from 2009 ([China Brief](#), March 2, 2017; [Reuters](#), August 27, 2021; [China Brief](#), January 19). Although the trend has slowed in recent years, the PRC has intensified its focus on achieving grain self-sufficiency by enacting a new food security law ([Gov.cn](#), June 25, 2023; [Gov.cn](#), December 29, 2023). The law requires local governments to include food security in their economic and development plans, which will increase efforts to bolster food production and grain insurance cover for farmers to protect their income. This clarifies the logic behind the NDRC's export controls, as the availability of fertilizer will remain vital to improving the PRC's food security.

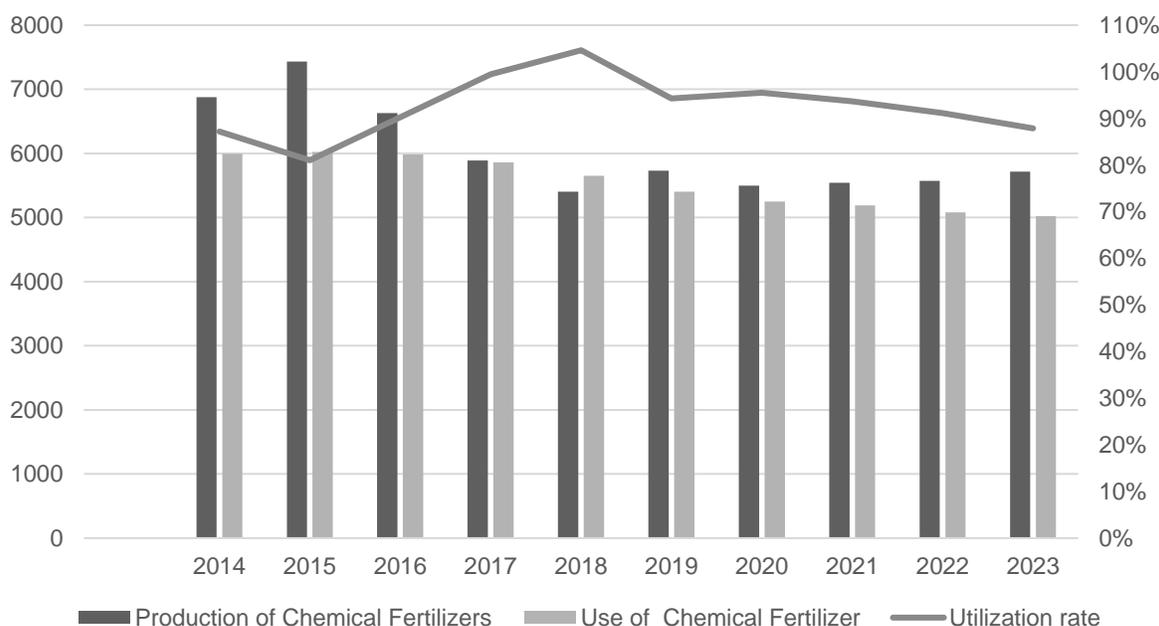
Recognizing the need for stability of supply, the PRC has implemented measures to ensure reliable access to fertilizers ([NDRC](#) August 22, 2022). Since the '00s, the government has maintained a strategic fertilizer reserve, recognizing its importance by referring to it in official documents as the “food” of grain (化肥是粮食的“粮食”). To support stable production, supply, distribution, and pricing, the government issues guarantees at the start of each year ([NDRC](#), February 6). These guarantees call on local governments to ensure the supply of necessary electricity and gas, as well as logistical support to facilitate fertilizer production and delivery.

Maintaining a level of self-sufficiency and affordability has been a key priority, but the PRC has also actively pursued policies to increase efficiency and curb the overuse of fertilizers, particularly nitrogen. This is done to improve the sustainability of the domestic agricultural sector. In 2015, the PRC committed to an “Action Plan for Zero Growth in Fertilizer Use by 2020” ([Ministry of Agriculture \[MOA\]](#), May 5, 2015). Between 2014 and 2021, the PRC steadily reduced its nitrogen fertilizer use by an average of 4 percent annually, with total use of chemical fertilizer dropping from around 60.2 million metric tons in 2015 to 50.2 million metric tons in 2023, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) ([IFA](#), August 20; [NBS](#), accessed October 1). [2] During this time, overall chemical fertilizer production also decreased from 70.3 million tons to 57.1 million tons ([NBS](#), accessed October 1). [3] Despite these reductions, the PRC has consistently maintained a slight surplus in production of chemical fertilizers. Between 2014 and 2023, the PRC used 93 percent of its supply on average, exporting the excess.

**PRC Regulations Push Production Overseas**

The primary motivations for the PRC’s strategy of placing export controls on fertilizer are short-term domestic concerns. Despite the surplus in its fertilizer reserves, the government aims to stabilize domestic fertilizer availability and, consequently, keep food prices in check amid rising global costs. Beijing’s dedication to protecting its food supply and ensuring affordability—an essential component of its national security strategy—reflects its commitment to guaranteeing price stability for domestic consumers and signals its reliability in addressing economic challenges ([Gov.cn](#), April 8, 2021). The sustainability of the PRC fertilizer industry in the medium and long terms is another motivating factor. The domestic industry is currently undergoing a significant transformation. This has manifested in substantial government investments in research and development to promote more efficient fertilizer use. Production in the PRC is set to undergo significant changes as part of a long-term strategy to reduce carbon emissions.

**Figure 2: Chemical Fertilizer Production and Use (10,000 metric tons)**



(Source: Author, based on NBS data)

Fertilizer production currently depends heavily on coal and gas. This is particularly the case for nitrogen, where the PRC is a global leader. Electricity shortages in recent years have even led to the shutting down of fertilizer production and other energy-intensive sectors, as the government has been forced to set priorities for energy distribution ([Reuters](#), September 9, 2021; [thepaper.cn](#), August 18, 2022; [Caixin](#), August 24, 2022; [Xinhua](#), July 3, 2023; [Asia Nikkei](#), August 29). Shortages are seasonal, typically occurring when capacity at hydropower plants is reduced due to extreme heat and drought, but they still contribute to unreliable conditions for fertilizer production. The impact of electricity shortages may fall in the future as the PRC

continues to enhance its grid capacity and energy storage solutions, but for now, it remains a concerning issue for the country's leadership.

Several policies have been designed to shift the sector away from its reliance on fossil fuels. For instance, the “Action Plan for Carbon Dioxide Peaking Before 2030” and related industry-specific initiatives emphasize energy efficiency and innovation in chemical processes, which indirectly impact fertilizer production by imposing stricter environmental regulations. These policies also aim to “curb the blind development of high-energy-consuming and high-emissions projects (坚决遏制高耗能高排放项目盲目发展)” ([Xinhua](#), October 24, 2021). The “1+N” framework is an indicator of additional regulations on fertilizer production, which is highly energy intensive. It outlines carbon reduction measures for all major emitting sectors, including agriculture and petrochemicals ([NDRC](#), September 23, 2022).

While additional regulation may accelerate the transition toward more sustainable and efficient practices within the PRC, it may have also incentivized Chinese companies to invest outside the country to diversify production and supply. For example, in recent years, China National Chemical Engineering (中国化学工程; CNCEC) has invested \$1.1 billion in Talcher Fertilizer in India (2019) and \$460 million in United Capital Fertilizer in Zambia (2022) ([AEI](#), July). In 2021, a subsidiary of the PRC company Asia-Potash International announced a \$4.1 billion investment in a potash mining venture in Laos ([AEI](#), July; [RFA](#), June 15). [4] Fertilizer investments abroad could supply increased agricultural investments ([MOA](#), June 20). Demand for fertilizer for agriculture projects overseas in which PRC entities are involved is likely to continue to grow, following the recent Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the BRICS Agricultural Ministers Meeting ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[MFA\]](#), September 5; [MOA](#), June 30). PRC companies shifting production to less regulated markets overseas could diversify production, secure supply, and still support the PRC's decarbonization efforts, without necessarily reducing their reliance on fossil fuels.

The PRC's domestic commitment to minimizing its environmental impact and meeting its carbon emissions goals while maintaining the productivity and self-sufficiency of its agricultural sector has additional implications for the global fertilizer market. As the PRC is expected to gradually decrease fertilizer production while ensuring sufficient domestic supply, the exports of its excess production are carefully managed to shield domestic prices from global instability. Other nations are therefore being forced to reconsider their dependence on fertilizers from the PRC. This trend is particularly evident in Asia, where countries such as South Korea, India, and Malaysia have traditionally relied heavily on the PRC to meet their agricultural input needs. The shift away from overreliance on the PRC, coupled with global market changes, is unlocking new capacities in other regions. For example, nitrogen use is expected to be replaced by new ammonia capacity emerging in Russia, Uzbekistan, the United States, Egypt, Nigeria, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, India, and Australia ([IFA](#), August 20). Similarly, phosphate production is expected to grow by 11 percent, with Africa and West Asia leading this expansion. Overall, the restructuring of the fertilizer landscape reflects strategic moves toward greater resilience and sustainability in global agricultural supply chains.

### **Conclusion**

The PRC's strategy for its fertilizer industry focuses on stabilizing domestic prices and agricultural output while reducing long-term carbon emissions. Although food security remains a priority, the PRC is set to gradually reduce its fertilizer use and production, maintaining surplus capacity to handle future uncertainties. As one of the world's largest agricultural players, the PRC's focus on self-sufficiency in fertilizer production reduces the risk of major disruptions for others, such as sudden surges in domestic demand draining global supply. By prioritizing domestic supply, the PRC minimizes its dependence on foreign sources, enhancing its ability to manage supply fluctuations arising from geopolitical tensions or market volatility. This makes it a more reliable and predictable player for international stakeholders.

The continued imposition of export restrictions when necessary to stabilize domestic prices adds to global market uncertainty, however. Consequently, the global fertilizer landscape is beginning to undergo changes as countries seek alternative suppliers.

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### **Notes**

[1] The Israel-Hamas conflict and escalating tensions in the Middle East have resulted in shipping delays in the Red Sea, fueling worries about possible price increases.

[2] See Indicator “农用化肥施用折纯量(万吨)” / of “Effective Component of Chemical Fertilizer (10,000 tons)” under “农业” / “Agriculture” and “有效灌溉面积、化肥施用量 (...)” / “Irrigated Area, Consumption of Chemical Fertilizer (...)” in annual data.

[3] See indicator “农用氮、磷、钾化肥产量(万吨)” / “Output of Industrial Products, Chemical Fertilizers (10,000 tons)” under “工业” / “Industry” and “工业产品产量” / “Output of Industrial Products” in annual data.

[4] The AEI data is based on 2024 Q2 numbers. These are not currently publicly available and were acquired through a request by the author.