



VOLUME 24 • ISSUE 22 • NOVEMBER 15, 2024

IN THIS ISSUE:

PRC Sees Opportunities in US Election Results

By Arran Hope.....pp. 2–6

The Power Vertical: Centralization in the PRC’s State Security System

By Edward Schwarck.....pp. 7–17

Diplomatic Data Signals Shifts over the Xi Era

By Sense Hofstede.....pp. 18–30

Tibet-Aid Program at 30: Driving Tibet’s Development in Xi’s ‘New Era’

By Devendra Kumar.....pp. 31–36

PRC Sees Opportunities in US Election Results

By Arran Hope

of the cartoon



China Daily cartoon from November 4 captioned “Public confidence abated in election ‘war of words.’”
(Source: [China Daily](#))

Executive Summary:

- Beijing has been preparing for a Trump presidency since at least the spring, assessing potential cabinet picks and their views on the People’s Republic of China (PRC).
- Since November 5, the PRC has hyped areas in which the United States might want to cooperate, including those in which Beijing has leverage.
- Many see opportunities stemming from Trump’s likely approach to governing, his isolationist outlook, and his proximity to Elon Musk and other similar figures.
- Beijing’s calls for stability in the relationship are not made in good faith, as evidenced by efforts in state media and through covert interference and disinformation campaigns to sow confusion and distrust among the US electorate.

On November 7, the day after Donald Trump was elected President of the United States for the second time, Xi Jinping became one of the first world leaders to offer his congratulations ([MFA](#), November 7). The official announcement of the call from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was brief, but clearly telegraphed the priorities Xi wished to communicate.

This MFA statement and other analyses suggest the PRC will seek to push areas of cooperation where it sees opportunities to advance its objectives, though entreaties to cooperate do not imply that Beijing is willing to make many concessions. Sources also speculate on how personalities in the new administration might be handled to Beijing's advantage or to mitigate damages.

PRC Touts Cooperation

Cooperation is the watchword, though Xi clearly hopes that this can be on his own terms. The readout begins by stating that “Xi Jinping noted, history shows us that when China and the United States cooperate, both benefit, and when they fight, both are harmed (历史昭示我们，中美合则两利、斗则俱伤).” Xi went on to suggest that bilateral relations developing along a stable, healthy, and sustainable path is not just in the interest of not both countries but is also “the expectation of the international community (国际社会期待),” before hoping that they set off on a path of the two countries “getting along correctly (正确相处)” in this new era ([MFA](#), November 7). It is debatable how much one should read into such official announcements, as it is unclear how closely they reflect the actual conversation that took place (the PRC readout does not disclose anything that Trump said during the call). However, the contents of this readout convey a sense of hauteur on Xi's part—he does not simply suggest a desire to cooperate but attempts to imply some external pressure through appealing to the views of the rest of the world and warning that the United States will also suffer from any stronger actions the incoming Trump administration might take.

This mix of welcoming and warning is evident in other official coverage of Trump's victory. The *People's Daily* website ran with a piece on the “Flying Tigers”—a World War II air force group composed of US personnel that fought in the China theater against the Japanese and is a common symbol of US-China cooperation in official media ([People's Daily](#), November 6). A *Global Times* article from November 7 that borrows the “getting along correctly (正确相处)” phrase for its headline also suggests areas of cooperation. It cites panda diplomacy and Tesla in particular, alongside other more general areas ([Global Times](#), November 7). The piece follows up with some more monitory words, noting that the United States “must realize, China also has a right to development (美方需要认识到，中国也有发展的权利).” Meanwhile, a Xinhua commentary on November 8 titled “Grasping the correct course for the development of China-US relations (把握中美关系发展的正确航向)” argues that “the idea of changing each other is impractical, and the consequences of conflict and confrontation are more than anyone can bear (中美两个大国不能不打交道，改变对方的想法不切实际，冲突对抗的后果更是谁都不能承受). While it claims that the PRC's strategic intent is “bright and open (光明磊落),” it makes clear that its priority is to promote the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation through Chinese-style modernization, which is unlikely a project in which the incoming administration desires to be a participant. The commentary even has some advice for the next

Trump team: “A great power should act like a great power and have the breadth of mind and commitment of a great power (大国要有大国的样子，要有大国的胸怀和担当)” ([Xinhua](#), November 8).

The irony of this generally warmer approach is its stark contrast with much of the official coverage of the US elections up until the announcement of Trump’s victory. A Xinhua series titled “US Election Handbook (美国大选手记)” included an article with the headline “Watching American Public Opinion Tear Apart in Key Swing States (在关键摇摆州看美国民意撕裂)” that focused on divisions in the country and the general lack of faith in US democracy ([Xinhua](#), October 30). Another piece in the same series focused on the rise of betting markets during the campaign and criticized the monetization of the US political system. Titled “Election reduced to a ‘game of chance’ (总统选举沦为‘赌博游戏’), it gleefully announced that the election has become a ‘casino’ and ‘American-style democracy’ has ‘risen’ to a new level (大选变‘赌场’，‘美式民主’又‘上升’到新的层次)” ([Xinhua](#), November 4). Months of disinformation campaigns and media coverage seeking to undermine political stability in the United States undercuts the past week’s messaging from the same outlets and senior officials on the importance of maintaining stability.

Trump, Musk, and Isolationism Provide Opportunities

The PRC government itself avoided expressing a preference for either presidential candidate. This has been a fairly common view within the PRC, leading to the resurgence of a phrase from the Qing dynasty classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*, “All crows under heaven are the same black (天下乌鸦一般黑，岂有两样的),” to indicate ambivalence between the two ([Netease](#), August 10; [163.com](#), October 25).

There are indications that Beijing sees opportunities in a Trump victory. Reports of attempted online election interference by PRC actors suggest that, even if the principal aim was to sow confusion, a lot of disinformation efforts pushed pro-Trump narratives, including fake accounts posing as Trump supporters ([CAA](#), August; [Graphika](#), September 3; [Microsoft Threat Intelligence](#), September 17).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) feels better prepared for a second Trump administration. An article in the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) said that policy strategy and contingency planning began this spring, quoting anonymous sources involved in the research. A state-affiliated researcher also told the reporters that the country’s top international relations think tanks have all submitted papers on prospective cabinet members and their individual views of the PRC ([SCMP](#), November 7).

Many PRC analysts see advantages in Trump personally occupying the White House. The incoming president is commonly referred to online as “Nation-builder Trump (川建国),” implying that he helps the PRC to build its comprehensive national power ([VOA](#), July 19). He is also widely viewed as a transactional figure who is open to making deals. An op-ed by Henry Huiyao Wang (王辉耀), who runs the united front-affiliated Center for China and Globalization (CCG) think tank, argues that a “Transactional Trump may well improve US-China ties” ([CCG](#), November 9). Part of Wang’s calculus is that Trump will be obliged to cooperate with the PRC to enact certain parts of an isolationist agenda. These include negotiating a “Phase Two” trade deal, ending the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and maintaining the status quo

over Taiwan. Wu Xinbo (吴心伯), a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, to this list cooperation on drug control to this list ([WeChat/Jiemian News](#), November 5). Others see Trump's relative inexperience and unorthodox approach as working in the PRC's favor. One scholar writes that "Trump's amateurish approach will give global revisionist forces an excellent opportunity to showcase their skills" ([CDI](#), November 6). Meanwhile, the stridently nationalist commentator Jin Canrong (金灿荣) believes that Trump "has no stamina (后面没有后劲)," and so will not be able to harm the PRC much in the medium-to-long-term ([Renda Chongyang](#), November 2; [Guancha](#), November 5).

The PRC believes it will be ready to capitalize if the new administration does pursue a more isolationist approach. An article by three prominent scholars in *Foreign Affairs* over the summer—apparently written at the request of the Party-state—argued that "America first" would mean that Washington holds "less credibility and leverage in coordinating with other countries" and notes that the former Trump administration did not build and lead a strong multilateral front to counter the PRC ([Foreign Affairs](#), August 1; [Sinocism](#), August 15). Similarly, an essay by Ding Xueliang (丁学良), a professor at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, suggests Trump could cut the number of US troops stationed in South Korea and Japan by half, which Trumps hinted at during his first term, cease upgrading and expanding air and naval bases in the Philippines, and decline to provide military assistance to South Pacific Islands. This could lead to a dramatic strategic rebalancing in the region in the PRC's favor ([CDI](#), November 6). A post by Hu Wei (胡伟), thought to be the same Hu Wei who was formerly a professor at the Shanghai Municipal Party School and Vice-Chairman of the Public Policy Research Centre of the Counsellor's Office of the State Council, argues that Trump will cause the US strategy of outcompeting the PRC to run aground "(搁浅)," "create cracks (出现裂痕)" with allies, and cause its international leadership to decline. All of this, Hu believes, opens the door for the PRC to garner "greater international space (更大的国际空间)" ([WeChat/Zhongxi Daxuetang](#), November 7; [Sinification](#), November 8).

Elon Musk, who has been central to Trump's reelection and is looking to have an outsize impact in the incoming government, is also noted by PRC experts. Officials are said to looking into the prominent role he played during the campaign, as well as his ties with the PRC ([SCMP](#), November 7). Hu Wei also argues that Musk could be a "broker (掮客)" to "grease the wheels of US-China relations (润滑中美关系)," noting that he has publicly stated that Taiwan "is an integral part of China" ([WeChat/Shanxi Daxuetang](#), November 7). Musk has also suggested Taiwan accept a level of PRC control similar to that of Hong Kong, and it is reported that he has not provided Starlink connectivity to Taiwan at Vladimir Putin's request as a favor to Xi ([Taiwan News](#), October 28; [Wall Street Journal](#), October 25). Other business leaders in Trump's circle are also seen as a source of moderation, potentially leading him to be more open to PRC investment in the United States ([Sinification](#), November 8; [CCG](#), November 9; [Caixin](#), November 13).

Conclusion

Most PRC scholars and experts see tariffs, a potential resumption of a trade war, and further decoupling as highly likely. Some suggest a major crisis, a new cold war, or even all-out conflict as possibilities. This

suggests the PRC will operate cautiously in the opening months of the new administration, shoring up its advantages and pursuing conciliatory strategies elsewhere in the world while exploring how to deal with the new Trump administration. This is already evident in attempts at friendlier overtures to regional powers such as India and Japan.

If the US Government does decide to pursue policies that start to realize the PRC's worst fears, it is unclear how Beijing will respond, or indeed its capacity to do so. The triumphalist certainty that "the East is rising and the West is declining (东升西降)," which reached its peak in the COVID-19 pandemic, has given way in the last two years in the face of economic challenges at home. Xi Jinping might have opened his call with Trump with a call to learn the lessons of history but, as ever, it is unclear which lessons, and which history, really matter today.

Arran Hope is the editor of China Brief.

The Power Vertical: Centralization in the PRC's State Security System

By Edward Schwarck



The Hubei provincial offices of the Ministry of State Security and Ministry of Public Security located in Wuhan. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary:

- Centralizing reforms to the Ministry of State Security probably constitute the most important development in China's civilian intelligence system since its establishment in 1983. These reforms instituted "vertical leadership," under which the MSS is empowered to control local bureaus' personnel affairs, budgets, and oversight.
- Structural changes that began in 2016–2017 mean that local state security bureaus are no longer subject to the authority of local party committees, and so are freer to impose a security-first agenda on other government agencies, leading to a more oppressive political environment.
- The ministry is now better able to direct joint operations between bureaus, exploit pockets of regional expertise, and ensure that local activities serve the strategic intelligence and security requirements of the central government.
- The reforms are part of Xi Jinping's broader efforts to ensure that the "party center has supreme authority over state security." The state security system's further empowerment suggests it is likely to remain a powerful and durable interest group in PRC politics beyond the Xi era.

On September 25, 2024, newly promoted chiefs of provincial state security bureaus in the People's Republic of China (PRC) gathered in Beijing for a “training course (培训班)” organized by the Ministry of State Security (MSS). Coverage of the event was characteristically sparse, yet a careful reading of Minister Chen Yixin's (陈一新) speech at the opening session yields fresh evidence for reform of the PRC's secret intelligence and counterespionage system ([China Peace](#), September 25).

Chen used his address to analyze the “strengths and ‘shortcomings’ (优势和 ‘短缺’)” of provincial bureau appointees, describing them as “a team that the Party Committee of the MSS has comprehensively considered, carefully selected, and placed high hopes on (国家安全部党委通盘考虑、精心选拔、着力培养、寄予厚望的一支队伍).” Chen then exhorted his audience to “take the lead in implementing vertical management by the ministry's Party Committee over the work of the entire [state security] system (带头落实部党委对全系统工作的垂直管理).” These comments are striking.

In the PRC's decentralized polity, the authority to select, examine, and appoint the chiefs of a local state unit typically lies with its local party committee, not its functional superior, such as a ministry. The exception to this rule is a small group of state agencies under “vertical leadership (垂直领导),” where personnel authority rests with the *internal* party organs of a higher-level unit. This “cadre authority (干部权力)” is a critically important aspect of PRC politics. A party committee's power to hire, fire, reward, and punish state officials—such as state security bureau chiefs—determines the latter's lines of command and control as well as its incentives to comply with local over central authorities, or vice versa. As personnel authority also denotes control over budgets, staffing affairs, and oversight, vertical leadership is central to shaping a unit's capacity.

Chen's speech is the latest hint of a changing relationship between the MSS and its network of provincial and city bureaus, which are responsible for counterintelligence, political security, and most of the PRC's foreign intelligence operations using both cyber and human means ([IISS](#), May 2016). Following major reforms in 2000 that centralized the state security bureaucracy up to the provincial level, another round of centralizing reforms in 2016–2017 has ensured that command over operations, resources and oversight for local bureaus now lies squarely with the MSS.

Vertical leadership will strengthen the overall capacity of the state security system, ensure that local bureaus serve the needs of central—not local—government, and reduce local latitude for “rogue” operations at home and abroad. However, as a centralized state security system is no longer subject to the authority of local party committees, local state security bureaus will be freer to impose a security-first agenda on other government agencies, leading to a more oppressive political environment.

The Early Years: Dual Leadership, Decentralization, and its Discontents

The latest instance of state security centralization marks the endpoint in an historical process that began with the MSS's creation in 1983. For the first seventeen years, local state security bureaus were governed under “dual leadership (双重领导),” whereby authority was nominally shared between the vertical state security

bureaucracy and local party committees at each level. [2] In reality, command over state security organs was firmly in the hands of local party committees.

Local authorities were responsible for selecting, assessing, vetting, and appointing members of the bureau's leadership. [3] These included the chief, deputy chief, and the leaders of two in-house party organs: the discipline inspection committee and the political bureau. [4] "Administrative expenses (行政费)," including salaries, pensions, subsidies and bonuses, were drawn from local coffers. Local party committees had discretion over "personnel allocations (编制)," including staffing numbers, deployments, and departmental structure. [5]

The MSS struggled to shape matters in its own bureaucracy. The ministry could veto local appointments by withholding its "agreement," but the final decision still lay with a superior local party committee, not a superior state security bureau. [6] For matters of finance, the MSS supplemented local budgets by covering "operational costs (业务费)," which referred to "funds necessary to perform foreign intelligence and counterespionage investigations." [7] Yet this paltry contribution bought the ministry little influence. Between 1997 and 2004, a city bureau in Guangxi spent, on average, 40.4 million renminbi (RMB) per year on administrative expenses, compared to RMB 1.43 million for operations (96.5 percent vs. 3.5 percent). [8]

Operations were also partially decentralized. Officially, the MSS stipulated that "leadership over operations gives first place to a higher-level agency." [9] In reality, the ministry's administrative authority was superseded by the political writ of local party committees. According to a 1995 MSS source: "Due to its political nature, secrecy, relation to foreign affairs, and other characteristics, state security work—that is, foreign intelligence, investigations and security protection operations—must come under the direct leadership of party committees at each level (由于国家安全工作的政治性, 隐蔽性, 涉外性等特点, 它所主管的对外情报和侦察保卫的业务工作, 要受各级党委的直接领导)." Operations were run through an information loop known as "requesting instructions from and submitting reports to the party committee (向党委请示报告)." [10] Unsurprisingly, local state security chiefs bemoaned the difficulty of "correctly handling the relationship between serving central and local government (正确处理为中央服务与为地方服务的关系)." Zhang Song (张崧), the former chief of Yunnan's provincial bureau, noted in 1997 that "requests for advice and instructions on all state security deployments must be sent to local party committees. At the same time, it is necessary to give free rein to our subjective initiative and proactively carry out state security operations (凡事有关国家安全工作的部署都向地方党委请示报告。同时, 充分发挥我们的主观能动性, 积极主动地开展各项国家安全业务工作)." [11]

The result of the dual leadership system was widespread defiance of MSS policy. In 1999, the deputy chief (later chief) of Shanghai's state security bureau, Wu Zhonghai (吴中海), described a "personnel crisis" in the nationwide system evident in "organizational bloat, overstaffing and low efficiency." The problem centered on the tendency of local party authorities toward "promotions without demotions (能上不能下)," "assigning jobs by seniority (论资排辈)," "a bias toward maintaining stability (偏面求稳)," "looking after one's own (迁就照顾)," and "nepotism (任人唯亲)." Wu claimed that 58.7 percent of his bureau's officers were specialist

and technical personnel (including foreign language cadres), yet these were “mostly not assigned to roles that fit their training (相当部分不对口)”, indicating failure by authorities to manage staff efficiently. [12]

Decentralized funding, moreover, caused large discrepancies between coastal and inland regions and an inability to procure expensive “technical equipment (技术装备)” used for intelligence operations. [13] Local sources comment on how intelligence officers were chronically underpaid. One city officer quoted his aggrieved colleagues, lamenting that “they always think ... ‘we give so much but receive so little’ and that the social status of the state security agencies is low, the material benefits are relatively poor, and they are losing out.” Low pay was believed to increase the susceptibility of officers to recruitment by adversary intelligence services, which was perhaps the most dangerous flaw of the dual leadership model. [14]

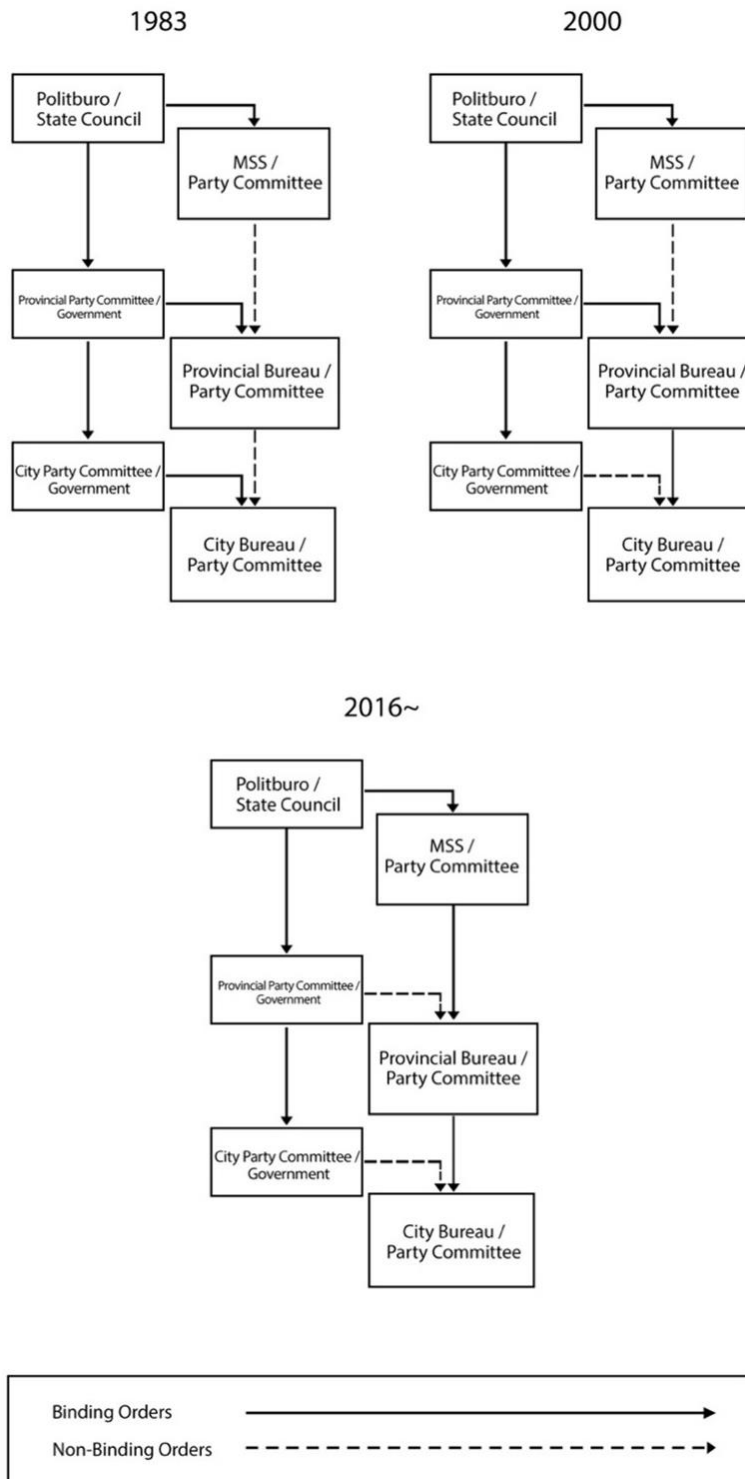
In operations, fragmentation of the state security system into self-contained tiers hindered cooperation between bureaus across regions. According to Li Donghui (李东辉), a city bureau chief in Jiangxi, “dual leadership results in a cleavage between duties and responsibilities (事权) and the power to promote and demote staff (用人权), leading to difficulties in truly coordinating efforts across the country and taking full advantage of joint operations.” Local party committees routinely suppressed “bad news reports (报忧信息)” that could discredit the local leadership, causing “bungled opportunities (贻误时机)” and “affecting higher level party committees, governments, and even the central government’s ability to grasp the real situation and swiftly make correct decisions.” [15] Local party officials blocked requests by local bureaus to seed state security officers into other government departments for the purpose of clandestine operations and interfered with bureaus’ scrutiny of foreign investment projects. [16] The bureau chief cited the belief of some local party committees that “strengthening state security work will scare away foreign and Taiwanese businessmen.” [17]

2000 Reforms: Improvements From Partial Centralization

In 2000, the three-tier state security system underwent major changes, instituting “soft centralization” that served as a prelude to the further centralization that was to come in the 2016–2017 reforms. The “dual leadership” model gave way to a system of “vertical leadership, two-level management (垂直领导, 两级管理).” In changes that the Central Organization Department (中央组织部) described as “highly secret in nature (保密性强),” city bureaus were placed under the command of their provincial superiors, becoming “directly subordinate agencies (直属机关).” However, relations between the MSS and the provinces remained decentralized. [18] The effect on operations and oversight was immediate.

Scores of city state security units across the country were “abolished (撤销)” or downsized in accordance with provincial state security bureau demands. [19] For example, Hubei’s provincial government implemented vertical leadership in July 2001, closing four city bureaus and allowing nine to remain. [20] Jiangsu Province, meanwhile, abolished two city-level bureaus, with redundant personnel incorporated into the local public security system. [21] The Baoji City bureau, in Shaanxi, lost nearly 19 percent of its staff and saw the number of internal departments reduced by 38 percent. [22]

Figure 1: State Security Leadership since 1983



(Source: Created by the Author)

City bureau chiefs across the country were forced to undergo “re-election” and regular staff underwent “reapproval (重新认可)” through centrally managed examinations, unleashing an outflow of the unqualified and the incompetent. [23] In Shandong, the provincial bureau praised the 2000 reforms for having “promoted operations, ... rationalized organizational structure, and regularized activity.” [24] In Nanjing, the introduction of “competitive incentive mechanisms” following vertical leadership “improved structure, cohesion, and combat effectiveness.” [25] In Xiamen, the city bureau noted in 2007 that the “largest scale personnel reshuffle in the bureau’s history” had taken place in recent years, resulting in a flow of staff from “non-core departments (非重点处室)” into operational ones, such as “investigations (侦查部门),” and “foreign liaison and security (外联外保).” The reform outcomes “better suited the requirements of the bureau’s focus on Taiwan work.” [26]

In finance, responsibility for “administrative expenses” was transferred to provincial state security bureaus, leaving local governments with minimal expenditure responsibilities. [27] Centralization prompted some provincial units to launch “thorough investigations of gaps in personnel allocations, funding, and infrastructure.” The Fujian government lauded the reforms for having “helped to resolve historical debt problems” among city-level units. [28] In Guangxi, province-wide state security spending rocketed by over 34 percent from 1999 to 2000, a “seven-year high.” [29] The source attributes the rise to the region’s sudden implementation of centrally mandated policing subsidies, which city governments had apparently failed to provide.

The state security bureaucracy also found itself in a stronger position to root out corruption following the expansion of cadre authority. A state security officer in Ningbo praised vertical leadership for having forced “the group of people with the highest incidence of rule violations ... to undergo redundancy and discharge from the state security agencies.” [30] In 2002, the Deputy Secretary of the Central Discipline and Inspection Committee, He Yong (何勇), heralded the “major system readjustment in the state security agencies to implement vertical leadership below the provincial level.” The reforms had helped “to seize the key nodes of power in this system and strengthen supervision and constraints; and had had important effects on preventing and managing corruption.” [31]

Vertical Leadership by the MSS

The PRC’s three-tier state security system was placed under vertical leadership by the MSS circa 2016–2017. This severed the commanding role that provincial governments previously had held over their local state security bureaus.

Direct evidence of these organizational reforms has been sparse. Over the past decade, rumors have circulated of major reform to the PRC’s state security services. From 2013–2014, foreign media and a former CIA counter-intelligence analyst commented on rumors in Chinese cyberspace that state security would soon undergo “administrative restructuring” ([The Diplomat](#), January 23, 2013). In 2017, a report by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) noted that “since 2014, Chinese and Taiwanese interlocutors have expected some undefined reform of the MSS” ([Government of Canada](#), May 17, 2018). Shortly after, Radio France International (rfi) reported that, beginning in 2017, provincial state security bureaus had inexplicably

“disappeared one-by-one (一个个地 ... 消失)” as provincial governments released plans for bureaucratic restructuring after the “Two Sessions (两会)” meeting that year ([rfi](#), October 30, 2018).

In official sources, traces of the reforms are widespread. A 2019 article by then-chief of Sichuan’s State Security Bureau Zhao Jian (赵坚), who now holds the same position in Guangdong, described his “modern and strong department” under a so-called “new leadership system” of “vertical leadership by the central government, with local governments as assistant managers (中央垂直领导, 地方协助管理)” ([Sichuan Pary Building Net](#), August 6, 2019). A 2017 annual report by the Guangxi provincial government mentions “reform to the leadership system of the state security agencies” as a key development. [32] Today, senior MSS officials, state legislation, and even members of the Chinese blogosphere routinely refer to the state security system as “vertically-led” ([Guancha](#), August 30, 2018; [Xinhua](#), September 1, 2023; [Baijiahao](#), October 10, 2023).

A relative lack of data on the 2016–2017 reforms precludes a comprehensive assessment of the latest changes to the organizational structure of the MSS. However, historical developments offer some compelling clues. As command and control no longer lies with local party committees, the ministry is better able to direct joint operations between bureaus, exploit pockets of regional expertise, and ensure that local activities serve the strategic intelligence and security requirements of the central government.

Control over personnel and funding enables the MSS to precisely deploy staff to strategically significant provinces and to directly control their dispatch overseas, offering greater flexibility in how the system as a whole responds to regional, national, and international threats. As with the 2015 reforms to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), centralization of state security has probably led to personnel downsizing, freeing up resources for larger staff subsidies, bonuses, and investment in equipment and infrastructure. The MSS’s control over staff intake and training programs will strengthen skills, security vetting, and political loyalty.

The counterintelligence agencies of the PRC’s foreign adversaries must still contend with a complex and dispersed threat actor comprising dozens of provincial and city-level units. Post centralization, provincial and city-level state security bureaus have retained seats on local political-legal affairs commissions (政法委), as well local state security committees (国安委), suggesting that local security units still accept tasking from local governments, in addition to central requirements. The nature of vertical leadership, however, implies that accountability for local operations now lies solely with the MSS.

Implications for domestic politics are of equal importance. Free from local party control, local state security bureaus are well-placed to serve as the central government’s “eyes and ears,” a role played by other vertically led information bureaucracies, such as local branches of Xinhua News Agency. [33] Vertical leadership over state security may strengthen the central government’s ability to detect local corruption and malfeasance. Conversely, untrammled scrutiny of local affairs by the centrally-led state security agencies may also induce caution, fear, and discourage local government discretion, autonomy, and risk-taking—the key ingredients of the PRC’s economic and societal development.

Local party committees were once empowered to block operations by their local state security bureaus. Today, the authority to do so lies with the MSS. For a local agency—or citizen—to challenge the legality or proportionality of a local state security operation, they must now escalate the dispute to the ministry itself, an onerous process that may invite unwanted central scrutiny ([Xinhua](#), September 1, 2023). It is possible that local state security bureaus will face fewer obstacles in prosecuting their missions from now on, such as surveillance, vetting of “foreign-related (涉外)” investment projects, and ensuring that data providers comply with state security legislation ([MSS](#), accessed November 8).

Conclusion

Vertical leadership is a critical, yet overlooked, element in Xi Jinping’s broader efforts to ensure that the “party center has supreme authority over state security (国家安全大权在党中央)” ([Qiushi](#), April 15). Given the profound institutional consequences of centralization and the winners and losers it creates, the state security system is likely to remain a powerful and durable interest group in PRC politics beyond the Xi era. The secrecy that surrounds the country’s state security agencies makes tracing the political and operational implications of centralization extremely difficult. Analysts should be no less attentive to their importance.

Edward Schwarck is a PhD candidate at the University of Oxford.

Notes

[1] Luo Xiangyi and Chen Youwen, 国家安全行政与管理 [State Security Administration and Management] (时事出版社, 1994) [Current Affairs Publishing], p. 69.

[2] Luo and Chen, p. 69; p. 177

[3] 组通字 41 号 (1999 年 7 月 22 日), [Organization Department Circular No. 41, 22 July 1999], ‘中共中央组织部, 中共中央政法委, 关于适当调整地方政法部门领导干部双重管理办法有关问题的通知’ [Notice from the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Political-Legal Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China: On Issues Related to the Appropriate Adjustment of Dual Management Measures for Leading Cadres of Local Political-Legal Departments], in 中共辽宁省委组织部编, 干部人才工作常用文件选编” [The Organization Department of the Liaoning Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China: A Selection of Commonly Used Documents for Cadre and Staff Work], (辽宁人民出版社, 2007) [Liaoning People’s Publishing], pp. 384–385.

[4] Luo and Chen, p. 69; p. 177.

[5] 组通字 41 号, p. 384.

[6] Luo and Chen, p. 69. See also: 财文字 744 号 [Ministry of Finance Notice No. 744], ‘财政部, 国家计划委员会, 国家安全部: 关于进一步明确国家安全机关经费管理体制的通知 (概要)’ [Ministry of

Finance; State Planning Committee; Ministry of State Security Notice: Further Clarification of the Funding Management System of State Security Agencies] in 河南省财政厅编 [Henan Province Finance Bureau (ed.)], 社会文教行政财务制度选编 1993.1–1994.1 [Volume 11 [Selected Editions of Social, Cultural, Educational, Administrative, and Financial Systems, January 1993 to January 1994, Volume 11], (河南省财政厅编, 1995) [Henan Provincial Finance Bureau (ed.)], pp. 739-740.

[7] 广西壮族自治区地方志编纂委员会编 [The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Local Chronicles Compilation Committee], 广西通志财政志 [Guangxi Chronicles Financial History], (广西人民出版社, 2014) [Guangxi People's Publishing], p. 159.

[8] Luo and Chen, p. 59.

[9] Luo and Chen, p. 59.

[10] Zhang Song, “努力深化国家安全机关的改革” [Strive to Deepen Reform of the State Security Agencies] in Zhai Qiyun (ed.), 中国党政干部改革论坛 [China Party and Government Cadre Reform Forum], (改革出版社, 1997) [Reform Publishing], p. 129

[11] Wu Zhonghai. “积极探索国家安全机关选人用人的新机制” [Proactively exploring new mechanisms for selection and recruitment in the state security agencies]. In: 现实问题的理论思考: 中央党校 97 级中青年干部培训班学员论文集 [Theoretical thinking on real problems: collection of papers by students of the 1997 training course for young and middle-aged cadres of the Central Party School], (北京: 中共中央党校出版社) [Beijing: Central Party School Publishing House], 1999, pp.1343–1345.

[12] Li Donghui, ‘关于加强国家安全工作几个问题的思考’ [Thoughts on Issues Relating to Strengthening State Security Work], in Wang Yongji and Wang Jiangling (eds.) 光辉的历程 [The Glorious Journey], (中国社会出版社, 1999) [China Society Publishing], p. 197. See also: 财文字 744 号 (Note no. 7)

[13] Cao Jun, 新形势下国家安全机关党风廉政建设的思考 and 对策 [Thoughts and Countermeasures on the Building of Healthy Government among the State Security Agencies under the New Situation], in 中共宁波市直属机关工作委员会编著 [Compiled by the Work Committee for Offices Directly Under the Ningbo Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China], 争做新世纪合格党员 纪念建党八十周年征文集 [Striving to Become a Qualified Party Member in the New Century: Collection of Essays to Commemorate the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the Party], (2001), p. 84–85. Low pay continues to be a complaint among cyber workers contracted by the MSS, according to documents leaked earlier this year ([China Brief](#), March 29).

[14] Li Donghui, p. 197.

[15] Luo and Chen, p. 54.

[16] Li Donghui, p. 197.

[17] 组通字 20 号 (2000 年 7 月 20 日), [Organization Department Circular No. 20, 20 July 2000], 中共中央组织部关于国家安全机关领导体制调整后干部管理和党的关系移交等有关问题的通知 [Notice from the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China: On Relevant Issues such as Cadre Management and the Transfer of Party Relations after Leadership System Adjustment among the State Security Agencies], in 中共辽宁省委组织部编, 干部人才工作常用文件选编” [The Organization Department of the Liaoning Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of China: A Selection of Commonly Used Documents for Cadre and Staff Work], (辽宁人民出版社, 2007) [Liaoning People's Publishing], pp. 392–395.

[18] 组通字 20 号. See also, 中共枣庄市委组织部, 中共枣庄市委党史研究室 [The Organization Department of Zaozhuang City Communist Party Committee; The Party History Research Office of Zaozhuang City Communist Party Committee], 中国共产党枣庄市组织史资料: 1987.11.2006.12 [Information on the Organizational History of the Communist Party of China in Zaozhuang City: November 1987 to December 2006], (中共枣庄市委组织部出版社, 2007) [The Organization Department of Zaozhuang City Communist Party Committee Publishing], pp. 132–133.

[19] Hu Yunzhao (ed.). 湖北省年鉴 2001 第 3 卷 [Hubei Provincial Yearbook 2001, Volume 13], (湖北省年鉴编辑委员会出版, 2001) [Hubei Province Yearbook Editorial Committee], p. 57.

[20] 无锡市史志办公室编 [Wuxi City Historical Records Office]. 无锡年鉴 2001 [Wuyi Yearbook: 2001], (方志出版社, 2001) [Fangzhi Publishing], p. 99.

[21] Zhao Zhonghu (ed.). 宝鸡年鉴总第四期 [Baoji Yearbook, 2002, Fourth Quarter], (陕西人民出版社, 2002) [Shaanxi People's Publishing], p. 117.

[22] See notes [22] and [24].

[23] 山东省国家安全厅机关党委 [The Party Committee of Shandong Province State Security Bureau]. 全面加强党的建设, 确保国家安全干警“对党绝对忠诚” [Comprehensively Strengthen the Construction of Agency Party Groups; Ensure that State Security Police are “Absolutely Loyal to the Party”]. In: Zhang Jinshou (ed). 机关党建工作经验汇编 [Compilation of Experiences of Agency Party Building Work], (北京: 中央党校) [Beijing: Central Party School], 2007, p. 82.

[24] Fang Yaguang. 江苏年鉴, 2001 [Jiangsu Yearbook, 2001], (江苏: 江苏省年鉴杂志社) [Jiangsu: Jiangsu Province Yearbook Periodical Agency], 2001, p. 131.

[25] 厦门市国家安全局课题组 [Xiamen State Security Bureau Research Group]. 创新基层思想政治工作的思考与实践 [Thinking and practice on innovating ideological and political work at the grass-roots level] in, 中共厦门市委直机关工作委员会编 [Work Committee for Directly-led Agencies, Xiamen City Committee of the Communist Party of China], 厦门市机关思想政治工作成果汇编 [Compilation of achievements of ideological and political work in Xiamen municipal organs], 2009, pp.153–154.

[26] 湘财行 (2001) 29 号 [Hunan Finance and Banking Notice No. 29], 湖南省财政厅, 湖南省国家安全厅关于认真做好国家安全机关管理体制改革后经费上划工作的通知 [Hunan Provincial Finance Department and Hunan State Security Bureau Notice: On Conscientiously Completing the Budget Allocation Work After Management System Reform among the State Security Agencies], 22 May 2001, Web Archive, accessed 12 December 2024: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201105015917/https://www.lawxp.com/statute/s1207575.html>. See also: 贵财行 4 号 [Guizhou Finance and Banking Notice No.4], 自治区财政厅关于调整国家安全机关行政经费共给的通知 [Notice: Autonomous Region Finance Department on Adjusting Administrative Funding of the State Security Agencies], in 广西壮族自治区财政厅预算处编 [Compiled by the Budget Department of the Department of Finance of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region], (广西人民出版社, 2004) [Guangxi People's Publishing], p. 282.

[27] 编纂委员会 [Editorial Committee], 福建财政年鉴 2001 [Fujian Financial Yearbook 2001], (福建热敏出版社, 2001) [Fujian People's Publishing], p. 82.

[28] 广西壮族自治区地方志编纂委员会编 [see Note 8], p. 158.

[29] Cao Jun, p. 83.

[30] 中华人民共和国检查部编 [Ministry of Supervision of the People's Republic of China (Ed.). '何勇同志在中共中央政法机关源头治理工作座谈会上的讲话' [Speech by Comrade He Yong at a Central Political-Legal Agency Work Forum for Governance at the Source]. 中国检查年鉴, 1998-2002 [China Supervision Yearbook 1998-2002]. (北京: 中国方正出版社) [Beijing: China Fangzheng Press], 2007, p. 1951.

[31] 自治区编办 [Autonomous Region Publishing Office], 全面贯彻落实党的十九大精神, 奋力开创机构编制和绩效考评工作新局面 [Comprehensively and Diligently Implement the Spirit of the 19th Party Congress and Strive to Create A New Situation in Organizational Structure and Performance Evaluation Work] in 中共广西区委执政纪事编委会编纂 [Compilation of Governance Records by the Guangxi Regional Committee of the Communist Party of China], (广西人民出版社, 2019) [Guangxi People's Publishing], p. 131.

[32] Tsai Wen-Hsuan, "A Unique Pattern of Policymaking in China's Authoritarian Regime: The CCP's Neican/Pishi Model," *Asian Survey* (2015) 55 (6): 1093–1115. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2015.55.6.1093>

Diplomatic Data Signals Shifts over the Xi Era

By Sense Hofstede



Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto. (Source: [MFA website front page](#))

Executive Summary:

- Xi Jinping's ascension to the office of State President led to an outburst in diplomatic activity that lasted until the coronavirus pandemic. Breaking with Hu Jintao's later years, Xi made more trips than his Prime Minister and engaged in a greater number of state visits before 2020.
- Li Qiang's replacement of Li Keqiang as Prime Minister has led to a reversion to the prior norm of the Premier conducting the most state visits. This is likely due to Xi's higher degree of trust in Li than in his predecessor, and possibly due to Xi's aging.
- The United States was in the top two countries in terms of diplomatic engagements during Xi Jinping's first term, but interaction cratered after Trump took office. By contrast, Europe is the most popular destination, with a particular focus on France and Germany.
- Russia's diplomatic relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) is uniquely intense, with annual visits every year and annual exchanges at the levels of prime minister, foreign minister, and national security advisor.
- Rhetorical support for Africa is not reflected in practice, despite the foreign minister's traditional year-opening visit. Xi Jinping has made only 7 state visits to the continent, compared to 23 to Europe ex-Russia, which has also received nearly 1.5 as many visits of all kinds than its larger southern neighbor.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is responsible for the country's day-to-day diplomacy. One of its key tasks is organizing incoming and outgoing diplomatic visits. [1] For instance, on November 11, the MFA announced that former Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu, currently sidelined as Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, visited Beijing for the latest round of regular "strategic security consultations" between the two countries ([FMPRC](#), November 11). Also this week, President Xi Jinping departed for Latin America to attend the APEC summit in Peru and make a state visit to Brazil ([FMPRC](#), November 8). It is hard to judge the state of PRC diplomacy under Xi based on discrete events such as these, or to assess how exceptional Beijing's ties with Russia really are. However, in the aggregate, data on all such visits reveals insights into how the PRC approaches its formal diplomatic engagements, and which parts of the world it prioritizes.

Analysis of all visits announced by the MFA since the beginning of former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) general secretary Hu Jintao's (胡锦涛) second term in 2008 provides some preliminary answers to these questions ([FMPRC](#), accessed November 13). [2] The PRC party-state is a hierarchical system in which the use of fixed phrases, assignments of rank, and compliance with precedent are important indicators ([China Brief](#), September 20). This means that it is meaningful to track not just visits, but also the nature of the visit afforded to various partners. The seniority of the PRC representative, and whether the foreign representatives are invited or, as is often the case with the United States, met by "joint agreement (双方商定)," can provide a sense of Beijing's diplomatic priorities.

For the purposes of analysis, visits have been tabulated using the following categories: the names and titles of PRC delegation leaders; the names and titles of the foreign interlocutor, whether the host or guest of the PRC delegation; the dates on which visits took place; and the type of visit, to include state visits (国事访问), official visits (正式访问), working visits (工作访问), normal visits (访问或访华), event attendances (出席), or others. If there are summits, forums, or bilateral commission meetings, those are listed too. There is some occasional variation in these categories. For instance, PRC representatives' titles can differ, such as through the addition of Party titles when their interlocutor is the representative of another communist country ([China Brief](#), July 26).

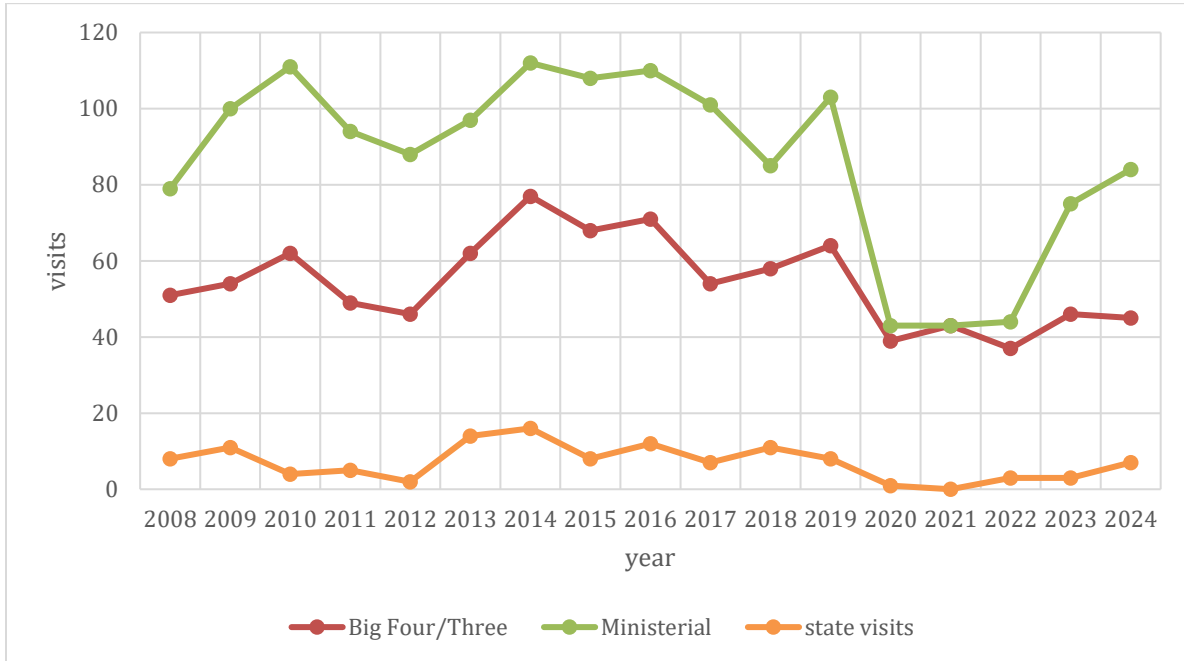
PRC Diplomatic Calendar Sees Recurring Meetings and Summits

Some aspects of the foreign minister's schedule each year are relatively fixed and include a number of visits to specific countries or international fora and events. The minister has kicked off every year for 34 consecutive years with a visit to several African countries ([FMPRC](#), September 5). In March or April, the Bo'ao Forum for Asia (博鳌亚洲论坛) is held on Hainan Island ([Bo'ao Forum for Asia](#), accessed November 13). This is often an occasion for regional leaders to visit the PRC, especially in years where the president or premier is set to deliver a speech.

Different parts of the world usually receive PRC delegations during different times of the year. High-level PRC officials tend to visit Europe in the first half of the year, for instance. Visits to Southeast Asia most often take place in the fourth quarter, to coincide with the ASEAN summits in the second half of the year and the APEC

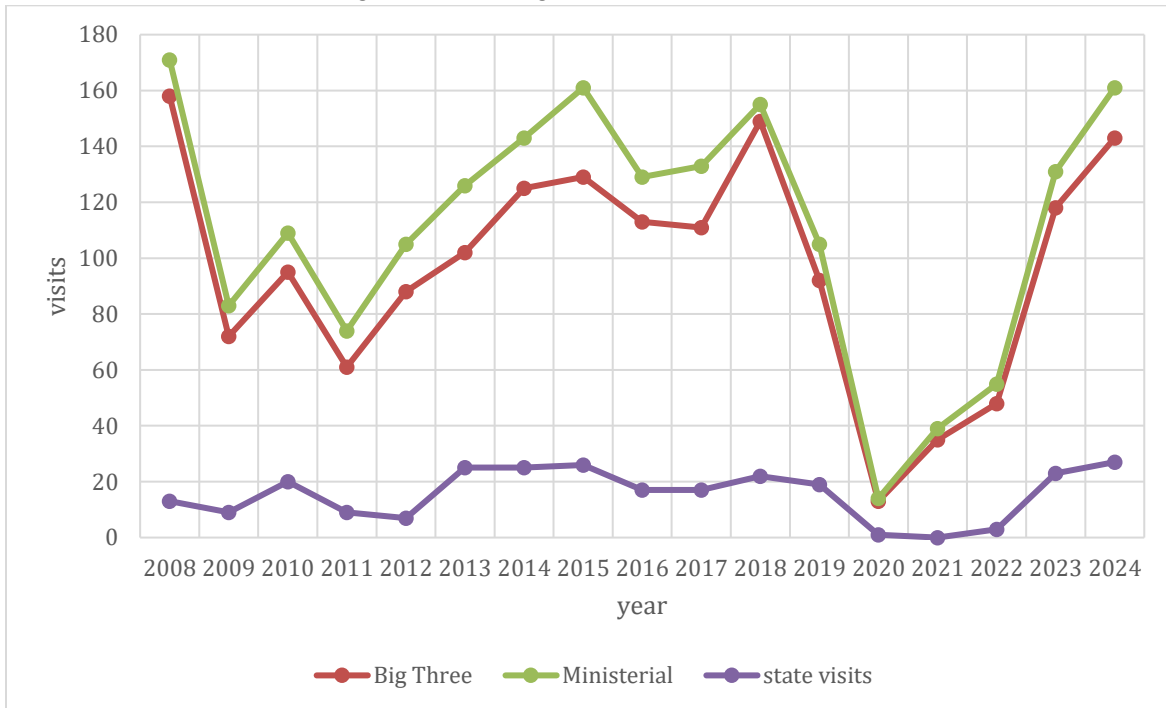
summit around November, which the foreign minister and premier usually attend. Other regions are more scattered throughout the year, though Central Asian trips are generally linked to the timing of summits there. The BRICS summit is usually in the second half of the year.

Figure 1: Outgoing Official Visits 2008–2024*



(Source: Author research. *Data for 2024 up to November 14.)

Figure 2: Incoming Official Visits 2008–2024*



(Source: Author research. *Data for 2024 up to November 14.)

Different levels of the PRC hierarchy attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits, following a fixed order in which they occur. In general, the foreign ministers' summit takes place between May and July, the heads of state meet sometime in June through September, ending the year with the heads of government between October to December. The president's trip to SCO meetings is unique for summits in that it usually also entails a full state visit to the host country. BRICS summits have no set pattern but are generally summer affairs. As for the annual United Nations General Assembly sessions in September, the foreign minister usually travels to New York, though in 2023 the vice president went instead, as did the prime minister in 2016 and 2010. [3]

When the PRC hosts state visits, the visiting country's foreign minister usually makes a preparatory trip in advance. The most common kind of incoming trip is one where the foreign official "attends (出席)" a meeting. The PRC uses large summits to give many foreign officials the chance to meet PRC leaders without having to organize an independent visit. The most common outgoing—and second most common incoming—visits are "official visits (正式访问)." Less common on both fronts are the two lower ranked terms for visit, "*fangwen* (访问)" and "*fanghua* (访华)." In a standard year, the PRC receives in excess 20 "state visits (国事访问)." There are other kinds of visits too, though these are also less frequent. They include "working visits (工作访问)" and "official friendly visits (正式友好访问)." The latter has been used for delegations to Africa, Laos, Indonesia, and Japan in 2018 and 2019, as well as for isolated visits to Ethiopia (2012), Malaysia (2013), and North Korea (2011 and 2024). The only incoming visit that has been described as an "official friendly visit" was North Korea's reciprocal visit in 2011.

Trends in Diplomatic Engagement Across the Xi Era

A burst of outgoing diplomatic activity is clear following Xi's installation as State President until the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns. These visits have not fully recovered following reopening, according to the data. However, this is in contrast to relatively constant incoming traffic. More work on Hu Jintao's first term should clarify the extent to which this has been the case since the early twenty-first century.

Under Xi, the world leaders who have visited the PRC most frequently are Hun Sen, who served as Cambodia's prime minister 1998–2023, who made 13 visits, and Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who has made 12. Third place in this ranking is shared by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Thai princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, each of whom have visited the PRC 10 times. [4] This strongly supports other evidence that Russia is currently the PRC's strongest partner ([China Brief](#), April 25).

Country rankings reinforce this finding. Russia is by far the most favored destination for PRC officials, as well as the second of third-highest source of visiting delegations. Interestingly, its proportional dominance in the former metric has declined since Xi's first five-year term. Meanwhile, while the United States constituted an important destination for and source of diplomatic exchanges in Xi's first term, this rapidly dried up coinciding with Donald Trump entering the White House in January 2017.

The bureaucratic reordering in favor of the Party at the start of Xi Jinping’s second term in 2018 shows up in the data. After the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group (中央外事工作领导小组) was upgraded to Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC; 中央外事工作委员会), Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪) and Wang Yi (王毅) were referred to by their title of the office director (办公室主任) also when receiving foreign ministers. Xi Jinping’s title of CCP General Secretary (中共中央总书记) is generally only invoked when his diplomatic counterpart is from a fellow communist country, which was already the norm.

Table 1: Top 5 Destinations for Official Visits per Term

Top 5 outgoing countries in Xi’s first term		Top 5 outgoing countries in Xi’s second term		Top 3 outgoing countries in Xi’s third term (incomplete)	
Russia	38	Russia	14	Russia	11
United States of America	21	France	11	France	7
France Germany	12	Germany	10	Germany Indonesia Kazakhstan South Africa	4
India	11	Japan Singapore	8		
Indonesia United Kingdom South Korea	10	Indonesia Kazakhstan United Arab Emirates South Africa South Korea	7		

(Source: Author research)

Table 2: Top 5 Countries Hosted for Official Visits per Term

Top 5 incoming countries in Xi’s first term		Top 5 incoming countries in Xi’s second term		Top 3 incoming countries in Xi’s third term (incomplete)	
United States of America	27	Pakistan	14	Malaysia Vietnam	9
Thailand	23	Russia	12	Cambodia Kazakhstan Russia Thailand	8
Russia	22	Indonesia The Philippines	10	Indonesia	7
Cambodia	20	Japan Kazakhstan	9		
France	19	Cambodia Uzbekistan	8		

(Source: Author research)

Xi Jinping

Since his ascension to the office of CCP General Secretary in October 2012 and to that of President in March 2013, Xi Jinping has overseen a new direction in PRC diplomacy. This shift is visible in diplomatic visits since he came to power (Figure 1).

Two changes stand out after Xi took over. First, there was an immediate uptick following several years of relatively low diplomatic engagement (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). The early years of the Xi era saw growth in both outgoing state visits by Xi and incoming trips at the ministerial level and above. Particular peaks are due to large-scale summits, such as the Beijing gatherings of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2018 and 2024, the first two Belt and Road Forums (BRFs) of 2017 and 2019, as well as the 2015 Second World War victory parade and the summit with Central and Eastern European countries.

Second, Xi has personally taken on a more active role. In the rankings of outgoing visits, the positions of president and prime minister swap places in 2013 (See Table 3). While Hu Jintao made fewer trips than his Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (温家宝) after 2010, Li Keqiang (李克强) was in Xi's shadow throughout his first term, during which time only Foreign Minister Wang Yi made more trips abroad than Xi (Table 4).

Table 3: Number of Outgoing Visits by the PRC President and Prime Minister per Year

	Xi Jinping		Premier
2024	8	<i>Li Qiang</i>	13
2023	4		5
2022	5	<i>Li Keqiang</i>	1
2021	0		0
2020	1		0
2019	11		5
2018	13		9
2017	8		8
2016	16		10
2015	16		12
2014	22		16
2013	15		9
	Hu Jintao		
2012	6	<i>Wen Jiabao</i>	20
2011	7		9
2010	10		18
2009	14		10
2008	10		5

(Source: Author research)

This was a continuation of sorts, as Xi was also active in his capacity as vice president during Hu’s second term. In the period 2008–2012, Xi went on 41 overseas trips—more than all but three other officials (Hu, in third place, went on 47). Notably, this overlaps partially with the period 2009–2015, which saw a more active diplomatic role for vice presidents, according to the MFA data.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal course of diplomatic engagement but appears to have reversed the trends in terms of Xi’s personal travel. While Wang Yi and Yang Jiechi kept up a large number of outgoing visits throughout the period, the onset of the pandemic put an end to an unusually active period for Xi. The MFA lists 77 trips during his first term as president, outstripping Hu in his later years in charge, but only 30 during his second. Two years into his third, and he has only been on 12 trips abroad so far. Prime Minister Li Qiang now travels more than his President, in contrast to his predecessor. In the aggregate, however, outgoing visits seem to not have reverted to pre-pandemic levels, though incoming visits from foreign diplomats appear to have resumed a regular frequency (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

Table 4: Top 10 Officials at the Ministerial-level or Above per Term by Overseas Travel

Top 10 outgoing persons in Xi’s first term		Top 10 outgoing persons in Xi’s second term		Top 10 outgoing persons in Xi’s third term (incomplete)	
Wang Yi	152	Wang Yi	146	Wang Yi	38
Xi Jinping	77	Yang Jiechi	50	Li Qiang	18
Li Keqiang	56	Xi Jinping	30	Xi Jinping	12
Yang Jiechi	54	Li Keqiang	14	Han Zheng	11
Liu Yandong	32	Wang Qishan	14	Ding Xuexiang	9
Zhang Gaoli	28	Sun Chunlan	10	Liu Guozhong	8
Wang Yang	27	Qin Gang	9	Qin Gang	8
Li Yuanchao	16	Hu Chunhua	7	Chen Wenqing	6
Ma Kai	14	Wang Yang	6	Shen Yiqin	4
Wang Yong	11	Wang Yong	5	He Lifeng	3

(Source: Author research)

The above data suggests trends in PRC diplomacy fit with several reports on Xi Jinping’s exercise of power more broadly throughout his tenure. Scholarly accounts have characterized his first term as more vigorous and focused on centralizing power, as well as overseeing a shift to a more assertive foreign policy. [5] Over time, perhaps due to aging or consolidation of power, Xi has apparently felt more inclined to delegate tasks back to subordinates that he trusts ([South China Morning Post](#), August 21, 2023). One related possibility for Xi’s more prominent role in diplomatic visits over that of his former prime minister Li Keqiang during his first term could also be attributed to the alleged rivalry between the two.

Russia

Russia has been the principal destination throughout Xi’s time in office and the second-most common source of incoming visitors (Tables 1 & 2). In 2013, Xi made his first state visit to Moscow, continuing a pattern of

uniquely close interaction that the PRC has had northern neighbor for most of its existence ([Gov.cn](#), March 22, 2013).

The PRC and Russia have held a state visit almost every year since at least 1999. In uneven years, PRC presidents visit Russia, while Russian presidents visit the PRC in even years (Tables 5 & 6). The only exceptions have been the pandemic years 2020 and 2021, Putin’s “official visit” in 2002, and Xi Jinping’s “attendance” at the World War II victory parade in Moscow in May 2015.

Table 5: PRC Presidential Visits to Russia

President	Trip start	Trip end	Type	Forum
Xi Jinping	22/10/2024	24/10/2024	attend	16th BRICS Summit
Xi Jinping	20/03/2023	22/03/2023	state visit	-
Xi Jinping	05/06/2019	08/06/2019	state visit	23rd Saint Petersburg International Economy Forum
Xi Jinping	11/09/2018	12/09/2018	attend	Eastern Economic Forum
Xi Jinping	03/07/2017	04/07/2017	state visit	-
Xi Jinping	08/07/2015	10/07/2015	attend	7th BRICS Summit; SCO Heads of Government Meeting
Xi Jinping	08/05/2015	10/05/2015	visit	Victory Parade 70th Anniversary end of WWII
Xi Jinping	06/02/2014	08/02/2014	attend	Sochi Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony
Xi Jinping	04/09/2013	06/09/2013	attend	G20; BRICS Informal Summit
Xi Jinping	22/03/2013	24/03/2013	state visit	-
Hu Jintao	06/09/2012	09/09/2012	attend	20th APEC Summit
Hu Jintao	15/06/2011	18/06/2011	state visit	15th Saint Petersburg International Economy Forum
Hu Jintao	08/05/2010	09/05/2010	attend	65th anniversary of WWII victory
Hu Jintao	14/06/2009	18/06/2009	state visit	SCO Heads of State Meeting; 4th BRICS Meeting
Hu Jintao	16/08/2007	17/08/2007	attend	observe SCO counterterrorism military exercises
Hu Jintao	26/03/2007	28/03/2007	state visit	China Year opening ceremony
Hu Jintao	16/07/2006	17/07/2006	attend	G8 Dialogue with Developing Countries; collective meeting with the leaders of India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico and Congo (Brazzaville)
Hu Jintao	30/06/2005	03/07/2005	state visit	-
Hu Jintao	08/05/2005	09/05/2005	attend	60th anniversary of WWII victory
Hu Jintao	26/05/2003	31/05/2003	state visit	SCO Heads of State Meeting; 300th anniversary of Saint Petersburg
Jiang Zemin	15/07/2001	18/07/2001	state visit	

(Source: Author research)

The close relation between the two heads of state is complemented by active diplomacy at lower levels. Annual “Regular Meetings between the PRC Premier and the Russian Prime Minister” are supplemented by nearly annual visits by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to the PRC, and annual visits by the PRC’s foreign minister or state councilor for foreign affairs (with the exception of 2022). In addition, PRC Vice Premiers have played a significant role in meetings in Russia’s far east and, since 2018, the MFA has reported rare annual visits by the secretaries of the Central Political Affairs Commission and the Central Legal Affairs Commission (with the exception of the pandemic period 2020–2022). Russia’s former National Security Advisor Nikolai Patrushev was also a frequent guest in Beijing.

Table 6: Russian Presidential Visits to the PRC

President	Trip start	Trip end	Type	Forum
Vladimir Putin	16/05/2024	17/05/2024	state visit	-
Vladimir Putin	17/10/2023	18/10/2023	attend	3rd Belt and Road Forum
Vladimir Putin	04/02/2022	06/02/2022	attend	Beijing Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony
Vladimir Putin	25/04/2019	27/04/2019	attend	2nd Belt and Road Forum
Vladimir Putin	08/06/2018	10/06/2018	state visit	SCO Heads of State Meeting; 4th China-Russia-Mongolia Heads of State Meeting
Vladimir Putin	03/09/2017	05/09/2017	attend	9th BRICS Summit
Vladimir Putin	14/05/2017	15/05/2017		1st Belt and Road Forum
Vladimir Putin	04/09/2016	05/09/2016	attend	G20
Vladimir Putin	25/06/2016	25/06/2016	state visit	
Vladimir Putin	02/09/2015	03/09/2015	attend	1945 Victory Parade Beijing
Vladimir Putin	09/11/2014	11/11/2014		APEC Summit
Vladimir Putin	20/05/2014	21/05/2014	state visit	4th CICA Summit
Vladimir Putin	05/06/2012	07/06/2012	state visit	SCO Heads of State Meeting
Dmitry Medvedev	13/04/2011	17/04/2011	attend	BRICS Summit; Bo'ao Forum for Asia
Dmitry Medvedev	26/09/2010	28/09/2010	state visit	Shanghai World Expo; Soviet Martyrs Cemetery in Dalian
Dmitry Medvedev	23/05/2008	24/05/2008	state visit	-
Vladimir Putin	14/06/2006	15/06/2006		SCO Heads of State Meeting
Vladimir Putin	21/03/2006	22/03/2006	state visit	-
Vladimir Putin	14/10/2004	16/10/2004	state visit	-
Vladimir Putin	01/12/2002	03/12/2002	visit	-
Vladimir Putin	19/10/2001	21/10/2001	working visit	APEC Summit
Vladimir Putin	14/06/2001	15/06/2001		SCO Heads of State Meeting
Vladimir Putin	17/07/2000	19/07/2000	state visit	-
Boris Yeltsin	09/12/1999	10/12/1999	visit	-

(Source: Author research)

Africa

The African continent receives substantial diplomatic attention from the PRC. Beyond the foreign minister’s symbolic first trip of the year, a number of officials travel to African countries as presidential envoys (国家主席习近平特使). These tend to include ministers, members of the National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, or chairs and vice chairs of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). They are usually sent to attend presidential inaugurations and independence anniversary celebrations. Such delegations are also sent to Latin American countries, albeit with less frequency. In return, the PRC receives visits from African leaders, with the FOCAC and BRI summits often serving as peak periods for such interactions. African leaders have made more state visits to the PRC than their European counterparts, with 55 to Europe’s 42.

For the most part, diplomatic outreach to Africa occurs at lower-priority levels of engagement. Compared to Europe—which has fewer countries and a much smaller population—it is much more common for African leaders to “attend” an event rather than have a stand-alone “(official) visit.” In terms of state visits, Xi Jinping has only been on 7 state visits to Africa—fewer than once per year—of which 3 were to fellow BRICS member South Africa. By contrast, Xi has made 23 state visits to Europe (not including 4 to Russia), more than any other.

Table 7: Top 10 European (ex- Russia) Countries During the Xi Era by Diplomatic Engagement

Top 10 destinations		Top 10 countries hosted	
France	30	France	30
Germany	26	Germany	18
Switzerland	15	Serbia	16
Italy			
EU headquarters	14	Belarus	15
		EU headquarters	
United Kingdom	13	United Kingdom	13
Serbia	8	Hungary	12
Spain			
Belgium	7	Italy	11
Greece		The Netherlands	
Hungary		Switzerland	
The Netherlands	6	Greece	9
Portugal			
Croatia	5	Denmark	8
Czechia		Poland	
Belarus			
Finland	9	Czechia	7
Poland			
Slovenia			

(Source: Author research)

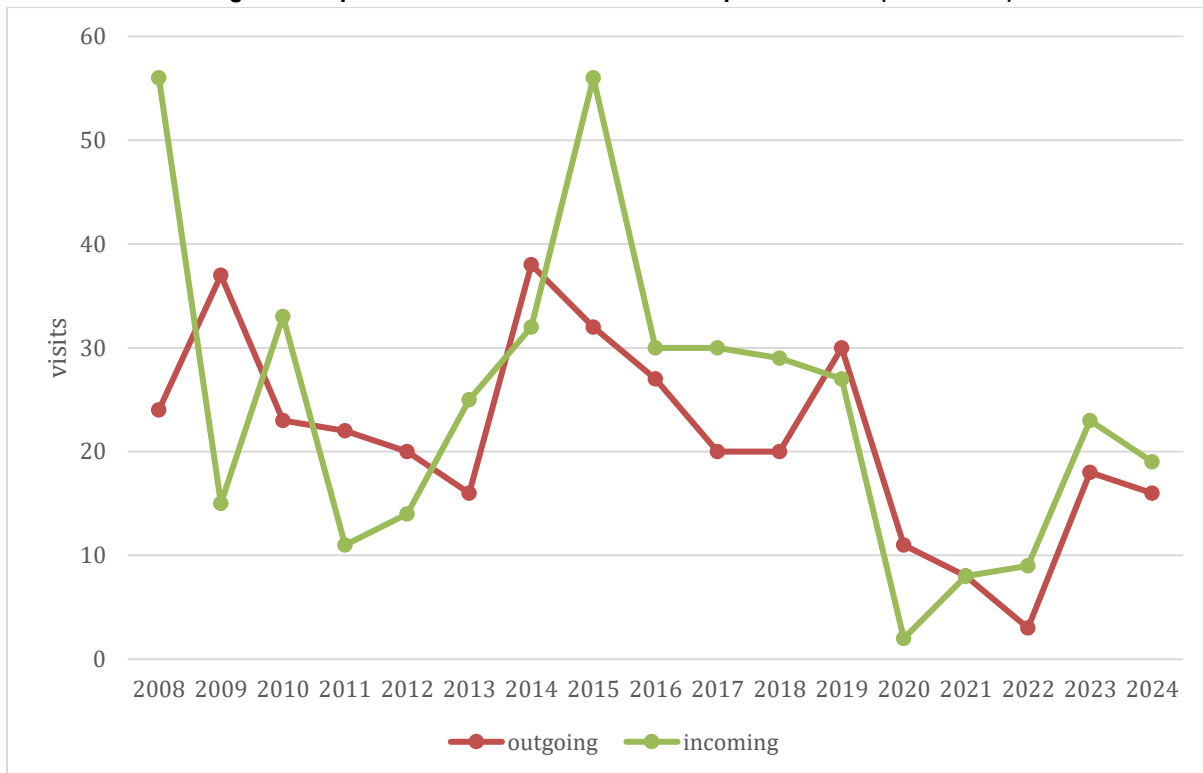
Europe

Europe is a clear target of PRC diplomacy. Beijing seeks to promote the European Union’s (EU) strategic autonomy from the United States and protect and expand economic ties with the bloc ([China Brief](#), May 24). The PRC has sent more delegations to Europe (including Russia) than to any other continent, with 50 percent more trips than to Africa. It has also received substantially more visits from European counterparts than from other regions, with Southeast Asia and Africa the next most frequent. While the diplomatic resources spent on European countries is out of proportion to the size of the continent’s countries, the reasons for doing so are supported by sound strategic and economic logic.

Among European nations, France has the highest diplomatic engagement under Xi, both sending and receiving 30 delegations, according to the MFA (Table 7). French President Francois Hollande was one of the first world leaders to make a state visit to the PRC after Xi’s elevation to the presidency. Germany ranks second, with particularly intense traffic during Angela Merkel’s tenure as Chancellor. Of note, interaction with Ukraine dropped off following the Maidan Revolution in 2014.

Visits to Europe (ex-Russia) peaked around 2014–5 but saw another uptick in 2018–9 (Fig. 3). Peaks in incoming visits can be explained in part by the China-CEEC Summit in 2015 and the Belt and Road Forums in 2017 and 2019. Following COVID-19, visits have resumed but are yet to reach the levels of the pre-pandemic period

Figure 3: Diplomatic Visits To and From Europe ex-Russia (2008–2024)



(Source: Author research *Data for 2024 up to November 14.)

United States

Diplomatic engagement between Xi's PRC and the United States has been unusually volatile and has been relatively sparse since Donald Trump took office in 2017. During Xi's first term, which roughly coincided with President Obama's second term, the United States was the second most popular destination for PRC diplomats, with 21 reported trips (Table 1). It was also the most frequent source of visiting diplomats, with 27 trips (Table 2). This contrasts with only the United States receiving only 7 delegations and sending just 6 to the PRC during Xi's second and third presidential terms combined.

Another unusual factor is how engagements with the United States are recorded by the MFA. Instead of detailing who instigated a visit, half the time writeups describe them as the result of a "US-PRC joint agreement (中美双方商定)," sometimes implying a degree of consensus between the two presidents.

Conclusion

The information outlined above provides a partial dataset that can be used as a departure point for data-driven analysis of PRC foreign policy. It demonstrates both continuities and departures between the Xi and Hu eras, as well as shifts during Xi's time in power. It also helps clarify that PRC diplomatic interaction with Africa is far less intense at the senior levels, in contrast to the persistent focus on Europe. Finally, it highlights how limited interaction with the United States has become since 2017, in contrast to a uniquely intense relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

The MFA dataset is incomplete. First, it does not include visits that the MFA has, for whatever reason, not recorded publicly. It also does not include visits by delegations from other ministries, even though the PRC's ministries of commerce and national defense maintain important international relations in their own right. And third, it also does not capture the growing role of CCP entities, including the International Liaison Department and the United Front Work Department. Nevertheless, the focus on high-level visits—cross-checked with the MFA website's "Focus (专题)" section—is largely reliable, and can give a good sense of Beijing's diplomatic priorities.

Sense Hofstede is an expert in the Chinese party state, cross-Strait politics, and the international relations of the Indo-Pacific. He previously worked as a Lecturer at Leiden University and Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute after his PhD in Comparative Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore.

Notes

[1] The most important foreign policy organ in the PRC may be the CCP Central Foreign Affairs Commission (CFAC). However, the MFA remains important because of its control over day-to-day diplomacy. Analysis of

CFAC remains beyond the scope of this article. See: Loh, Dylan M.H., *China's Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).

[2] The research for this article is based on a spreadsheet that was manually built by the author through processing all visits announced on the MFA's Diplomatic Agenda (外事日程), as well as related stops and visits announced there ([FMPRC](#), accessed November 13). The website does not go back all the way to 2008, so the Internet Archive was used to go back in time further than the live website allows (see [Internet Archive](#), accessed November 13). Terms referred to are those of President, not General Secretary. The data is current up to the date of publication (November 14, 2024).

[3] Other summits, such as the Singapore-based IISS Shangri-La Dialogue or the Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, are the responsibility of the PRC's Ministry of Defense and do not show up in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announcements. Similarly, climate summits, including the recent COP29, also do not always show up on the MFA's website.

[4] As the author's database only lists the names of the most senior official in a delegation, it cannot be used for more granular analysis. For instance, it cannot provide information on the total frequency of a given official's visits to the PRC, as it is possible they had visited on delegations of which they were not the most senior official.

[5] Doshi, Rush, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197527917.001.0001>; Rudd, Kevin, *On Xi Jinping: How Xi's Marxist Nationalism Is Shaping China and the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

Tibet-Aid Program at 30: Driving Tibet’s Development in Xi’s ‘New Era’

By Devendra Kumar



A medical team as part of the TAP at work in Tibet. (Source: Tibet.cn)

Executive Summary:

- The Tibet-Aid Program (TAP), a principal driver of development in Tibet, has ramped up significantly under Xi Jinping’s rule.
- The TAP has, throughout its 30-year history, sought to use material development to placate local tensions that have periodically arisen from the Party’s governance failings in the region. Most recently, the emphasis has been on improving the quality of healthcare and education.
- The TAP is a focus for the Party’s priorities, and the increasing flow of resources to “moderately prosperous” villages on the Indian border could be a cause for concern for neighboring India.
- Tibet remains an unattractive destination for cadres despite copious propaganda suggesting otherwise, which has helped perpetuate a relatively poor standard of governance in the region.

On November 11, 2024, the *Tibet Daily* reported on a book launch event held in Lhasa to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Tibet-Aid Program, sometimes also called pairing-up assistance for Tibet (TAP; 对口援藏) ([Tibet Autonomous Region \[TAR\] Government](#), November 11). The book, written by a cadre sent to Tibet from Zhejiang Province, eulogizes the work of his comrades and the region's beauty across 110 poems. This is the latest of a string of propaganda efforts this year that have praised the work of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the last three decades in bringing the region further under the control of Beijing. Beyond the book launch, websites for positive news stories around the anniversary has been set up by state media outlet Xinhua as well as the TAR government, both of which features as its top article a picture of a smiling Xi Jinping, waving in front of the Potala Palace in Lhasa ([Xinhua/TAP 30th Anniversary](#), accessed November 12; [TAR Government](#), accessed November 12).

The Party has also sought to promote its achievements in Tibet overseas. This week, state-sanctioned Tibetan Studies experts are visiting Latvia and Estonia. In the former, they discussed “the development achievements of China’s Tibet in the new era (中国西藏发展成就),” among other topics. According to the *People’s Daily*, the parliamentarians were grateful for the visit, as Latvian people “mostly learn about China’s Tibet from American movies and western media, and have accepted too many wrong views about it (多从美国电影和西方媒体中了解中国西藏，接受了太多有关西藏的错误观点)” ([People’s Daily](#), November 11). The overall propaganda efforts have been accompanied by key meetings in Beijing and Lhasa involving senior CCP officials, which have emphasized the TAP’s centrality and the need to further ramping up the program.

Wang Huning Outlines Way Forward in Lhasa

The most important event of 2024 for the Party’s approach to Tibet was the Fourth Tibet-Aid Work Conference (第四次对口支援西藏工作会议), held in Lhasa from August 27–29. [1] The conference marked the TAP’s 30th anniversary, and for the first time the meeting took place in the regional capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Wang Huning (王沪宁), the fifth-ranked member of the 20th Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and Chairperson of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) attended and delivered a speech, in which he signaled TAP’s increased centrality to the governance of Tibet under Xi Jinping’s leadership ([TAR Government](#), August 29). The fact that serving and retired senior officials travelled to Lhasa for the conference and the messages conveyed underscore the growing significance of the TAP in the PRC’s approach to the region.

Wang’s visit sought to underline the CCP’s focus on people’s basic needs. He visited Lhoka People’s Hospital (山南市人民医院) in Nedog district, which receives support from Anhui province, as well as the administrative seat of Southwestern prefecture-level city Lhoka (山南市) along the Indian border ([Xinhua](#), August 29). Projects announced since the Sixth Tibet Work Forum in 2015 have focused on healthcare and education, emphasizing the Party’s aim of ameliorating people’s standard of living in the sparsely populated yet strategically important region.

In his speech, Wang emphasized the “spirit of driving in nails (钉钉子精神).” Translated more euphemistically in official sources as the “spirit of perseverance,” the phrase was first used by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping at the second plenary session of the 18th CCP Central Committee in February 2013 ([State Council Information Office](#), July 11, 2019). It refers to the necessity of repeating actions multiple times before achieving the required result. As Xi noted at the time, “When we use a hammer to drive in a nail, a single knock often may not be enough; we must keep hammering until it is well in place before proceeding to hammer the next one. If you keep on driving in nails, then you will achieve great results (钉钉子往往不是一锤子就能钉好的，而是要一锤一锤接着敲，直到把钉子钉实钉牢，钉牢一颗再钉下一颗，不断钉下去，必然大有成效)” ([Party Member Net](#), February 28, 2013). In the context of Tibet, the phrase has been used to convey the priority of central government directives in key policy areas such as the “two centenary goals,” stability maintenance, and border area development.

Wang’s speech also echoed much of the official discourse around the 30th anniversary by referring to the “Spirit of Old Tibet (老西藏精神).” Invoked by senior CCP figures, including Xi, since the late 1990s, the phrase is intended to exhort Tibet-Aid cadres take inspiration from the Party’s seizing control of Tibet in the early 1950s to ensure long-term stability, development, and prosperity ([TAR CCP](#), June 26, 2014; [Xi Theory](#), July 2021; [People’s Forum](#), December 21, 2021). [2]

The invocation of this spirit is a nationalist call for mobilizing cadres to serve in the frontier region, which is not a popular destination. Beyond ethnic divisions, the negative attitudes of many Tibetans toward Han officials, low economic development, and—for Tibet-Aid cadres in particular—the harsh climate make it an unappealing place to be sent. Several cadres are known to have died while serving in the TAR due to the hostile conditions. Where appeals to nationalist sentiment have not sufficed, the CCP has resorted to offering cadres better wages, subsidies, and career advancement opportunities. These are attractive, especially for young cadres from poorer central and western provinces that neighbor Tibetan areas.

Early TAP Led to Uneven Development, Local Tensions

Beijing launched the TAP in 1994 on the recommendations of the third Tibet Work Forum in July that year. This followed widespread ethnic tensions from the late 1980s onward borne out of increasing inequality along regional and ethnic lines. The original blueprint for the program drew from earlier mobilization of cadres and resources from inland (内地) provinces during the heyday of Maoist socialism and an array of programs launched after a 1980 visit to Tibet by PBSC member Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) and that year’s inaugural Tibet Work Forum ([China Economy Online](#), April 8, 2008). Later, TAP also came to supplement the “Great Western Development (西部大开发)” strategy, which was launched in 1999 to channel resources from more prosperous and developed coastal provinces to poorer western provinces ([Gov.cn](#), October 10, 2009).

The TAP has a three-pronged assistance mechanism. These are the direct transfer of funds to the TAR government from partner provinces, centrally administered cities, central ministries, and institutions; the transfer of cadres to the TAR; and investments in specific projects in counties and prefectures in the region. Cadres from partnering provinces typically serve for one or three years in counties and prefectures where the

partner province funds projects. According to the latest official statistics, nearly 12,000 cadres across 10 batches have served from 18 provinces, 89 central organs and ministries, and 4 centrally administered cities ([People's Daily Online](#), August 16, 2022).

Functionally, the assistance projects range from “group style (组团式)” medical and educational assistance to poverty alleviation, urbanization, and infrastructure development in so-called “*xiaokang* villages (小康村; moderately prosperous villages)” in counties along the border with India. “Group-style” assistance in these villages began in 2015. It is characterized as a “people-centered” policy but is also intended to change the way projects are undertaken. Under this model, dozens of doctors, nurses, and teachers come to select hospitals to train local doctors and teachers and to change how hospitals and schools function at the holistic level ([Xinhua](#), August 23, 2022). The TAR provincial government has undertaken a massive project of developing more than 628 *xiaokang* villages in border counties along its border with India since 2017; and TAP has played a significant role in funding infrastructure, tourism, educational and health facilities there ([Toutiao](#), July 7, 2023; [Tibet.cn](#), August 26).

In the late 2010s, it became clear that the benefits of the TAP were not being distributed optimally. The structure of subsidies led to a form of “boomerang aid” that helped only a fraction of Tibetan elites and non-Tibetan migrants in urban areas. [3] Tensions flared in 2008, with massive protests in Tibetan areas. This provided the impetus for change. The Fifth Tibet Work Forum in 2010 called for intensifying the TAP as part of developing a “long-term strategy (长久之策).” It was decided that developed provinces, centrally administered cities, and central organs must set aside 1 percent of their fiscal revenue annually to the Tibet-Aid program, as well as emphasizing coordinated development ([TAR CCP](#), 26 June 2014; [Qiushi](#), August 27). This shift has become more pronounced under Xi Jinping, though it is unclear whether the sources of tension from 2008 will be resolved under this new path.

‘New Era’ TAP Focuses on Education, Healthcare, and Unity

Wang Huning’s August conference speech underscored the need to persist in policies across four domains: maintaining stability, increasing development, promoting ecological civilization, and strengthening border areas ([People's Daily Online](#), August 28). In Xi Jinping’s “new era,” the TAP is the primary vehicle through which these four objectives are to be achieved in the TAR. One of the earliest formulations of Xi’s Tibet policy came at the Sixth Tibet Work Forum in 2015. Xi articulated his priorities for governing the region as “six musts (六个必须),” which align with the approach taken by the TAP. Other priorities included strengthening the CCP’s organizational and ideological hegemony, expanding and strengthening local party organizations, and “rallying the peoples’ hearts (凝聚人心)” to promote ethnic unity ([Xinhua](#), August 26, 2015).

Wang’s also made repeated references to Xi Jinping’s earlier emphasis on creating a “new situation for Tibet Aid work (援藏工作新局面),” something that was picked up by official media commentaries ([People's Daily](#), August 29, 2020; [CPC News](#), August 30). In practice, “new situation” refers to the focus on rural revitalization, health, and education work, as well as the TAP as the key vehicle for achieving the party-state’s political goals of fostering ethnic unity and ensuring Tibetans’ support. It also reflects changes to the

structure of the program itself. For example, group-style education and health projects aim to bring about sustainable improvements to health and educational institutions in the TAR, as opposed to sending talents to temporarily make up for the region's shortage of skilled doctors and teachers ([Xinhua](#), August 6, 2022). Xi's personal interest in ramping up the TAP is often conveyed through media reports on his involvement in the TAP projects from the days when he worked in Fujian province in the late 1990s (CCTV, [September 8, 2015](#); [October 6, 2017](#); [People's Daily](#), July 28, 2022).

Media commentaries also referred to the capacity of TAP projects to “transform people's lives and win their hearts (改善民生凝聚人心).” Xi first articulated this phrase at the Sixth Tibet Work Forum, and refers to ensuring regime stability and loyalty through improving people's general quality of life ([China Daily](#), September 8, 2015; [Xinhua](#), August 28).

The increase in cadres serving under the TAP has been dramatic during Xi's tenure. Around 7,000 out of the total 12,000 have served since 2012, and the size of each batch has also risen substantially, from 622 in 1993 to 2,117 in the batch that has been serving since 2021 ([Xinhua](#), August 22). A notable driver of TAP's expansion came in 2015, when the Central Organization Department—which oversees all personnel matters for the TAP—mobilized the ministries of education and health, as well as the partnering provinces, for “group-style Tibet Aid work (组团式援藏工作)” focusing on education and health. Since then, the number of projects launched and cadres dispatched under these two sectors have contributed significantly to the visibility and centrality of the program in the CCP's Tibet policy ([Xinhua](#), August 23).

The expansion of the program to include cultural and educational domains also follows the Party's gradual shift to “Second-Generation Ethnic Policies (第二代民族政策)” in the last two decades. These refer to efforts by the central government to dilute the ethnic autonomy provisions and rights guaranteed to ethnic groups including Tibetans under the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law* (中华人民共和国民族区域自治法) ([Gov.cn](#), July 29, 2005; [CECC](#), February 2006; [Made in China Journal](#), September 7, 2020). For example, the Party has introduced a range of policies from increasing mandarin Chinese-language instruction in schools to appointing more Han cadres in contravention to the *Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law* ([Center of Excellence for Himalayan Studies](#), September 13, 2023). Educational and legal campaigns also seek to instill trust in PRC laws and regulations over Tibetan Buddhist religious norms and beliefs ([TAR Government](#), February 5). A common thread to the second-generation ethnic policies is “forging a sense of Chinese nation through national, legal, and civil consciousness (铸牢中华民族共同体意识和国家意识公民意识法治意识),” which has become “the key line of ethnic work of the CCP (新时代党的民族工作的主线)” aimed at creating a “unified (统一)” national identity ([Qiushi](#), August 8).

Conclusion

Wang Huning's presence at this year's Tibet-Aid Work Conference is the latest of several senior officials' visits to the TAR in recent times. This could indicate that the Party senses a degree of fragility in its hold over the hearts and minds of ethnic communities. In July, one month prior to the Conference, Wang also visited Tibetan areas in Sichuan in addition to spending time in the TAR ([Xinhua](#), [July 7](#); [July 28](#)).

The TAP's focus on education and healthcare reflects a conscious effort to redress failings in earlier policies by seeking to improve the material benefits that accrue to local Tibetans who have so far been excluded from economic benefits. However, the Party-state's belief that economic development will create a supplicant and peaceful Tibet could be misguided. By ignoring Tibetans' cultural and spiritual desires, insisting that they conform to a unified ethno-national identity, and diluting laws and regulations that enshrine their autonomy, Beijing risks following a self-defeating strategy.

The author would like to thank James Leibold for his comments and suggestions on a previous draft of the essay.

Devendra Kumar is an Associate Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi NCR (India).

Notes

[1] Official state media refers to this as the “Aid-Xizang” program (see [CGTN](#), August 29). This follows a push in recent years to refer to Tibet in English-language propaganda as “China’s Xizang.” This article instead used the traditional English name for the region: Tibet.

[2] The PRC government refers to the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) invasion of Tibet as the “Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (西藏和平解放)” ([CCP Member Net](#), accessed November 12).

[3] Andrew Martin Fischer. The Political Economy of Boomerang Aid in China’s Tibet. *China Perspectives*, 2009. DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.4842.