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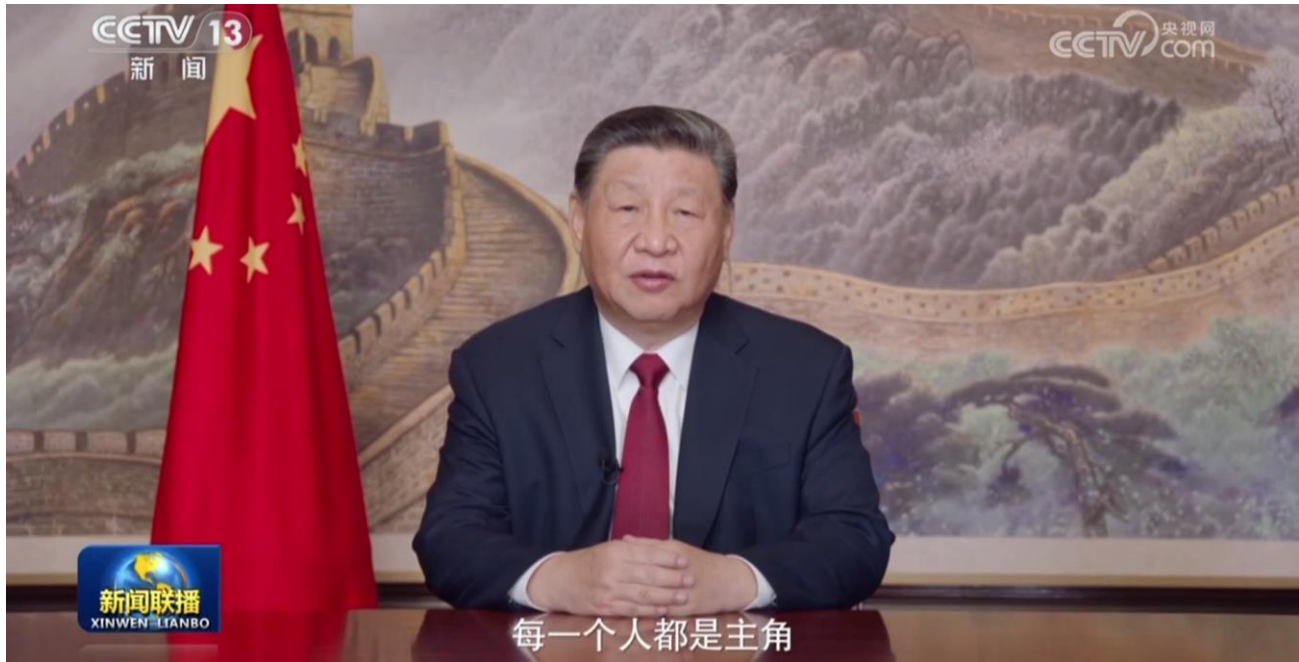
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**Dreams Deferred in Xi's New Year's Speech**

*By Arran Hope*



Xi Jinping delivers new year's speech. (Source: CCTV screenshot)

**Executive Summary:**

- Xi Jinping's New Year's speech hinted at weaknesses in the People's Republic of China.
- The speech emphasized the many hardships that people are currently facing at home while acknowledging fears about a turbulent external environment.
- Xi did not mention "national rejuvenation" and he conceded that the "China dream" was far from being realized.
- Doubling down on the ideology of struggle, a hard work ethic, and enforcing nationalist sentiment as crucial factors for escaping the current malaise, Xi's speech suggested a shortage of tangible solutions for the country's problems.

January is a busy month for the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It provides a short period to review the previous year, set the agenda for the year ahead, and prepare for the annual “two sessions” meetings of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in March, before the Spring Festival holiday at the end of the month. The announcement on January 17 that the economy met its 2024 growth target of “around 5 percent” represents part of this effort ([Xinhua](#), January 17).

In the “new era” under President Xi Jinping, the year always begins on December 31 with a televised address broadcast on CCTV-1, the country's main state television channel ([MFA](#), December 31, 2024). The speech follows a general format that has remained consistent throughout Xi's time in office. Running for just over ten minutes, it featured Xi sitting behind a large, wooden desk with artwork depicting the Great Wall as his backdrop. In it, the president addresses highlights from the past year and looks ahead to upcoming one, with the video of him speaking to camera frequently interspersed with clips from around the country.

As an annual phenomenon, Xi's new year's speech provides a useful benchmark that can provide insight into how the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) perceives their performance. While the content is mostly pro forma, any changes in terms of structure, additions, emphasis, or omission may suggest changes in Xi's outlook. Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Xi's rhetoric has become more candid, occasionally acknowledging some of the difficulties and challenges people are facing. Another trend is increasing emphasis on international affairs. In earlier years, this was relegated to brief references commemorating the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, which have since disappeared ([China Brief](#), January 5, 2024).

### **Unusual Speech Suggests Weaknesses**

This year's speech contained several notable differences from previous iterations. For the first time since 2017, and only the second time since he began making these speeches, Xi's was not seated in his office. As a result, no bookcases could be seen in the background, and so no information could be gleaned from the titles or the pictures that are often carefully selected for display over his shoulder, the salience of which are often painstakingly detailed in propaganda materials for those who don't take the hint ([People's Daily App](#), January 1, 2020; [CGTN](#), December 31, 2023). Also absent this year are the phone sets, the calendar, and the stationery that traditionally sit atop the desk. In another contrast, this year's speech was slightly shorter in length, and the camera appeared to cut away from Xi with more regularity.

Clear conclusions are difficult to draw from this choreography but, given the attention to detail that accompanies every carefully scripted Party ritual, these changes matter. A comparison with the other outlier, the 2017 speech, provides some clues ([Xinhua](#), December 31, 2016). In 2017, Xi strode into the hall, gripped the podium with both hands, and stared down the camera to deliver his speech, exuding confidence as he declared significant breakthroughs in military reforms and world-beating achievements in other domains. This year, Xi cuts a much more isolated figure, no longer surrounded by family photos, unable to pick up the phone. One can speculate that this might represent Xi's increasing isolation at the top of the Party, though it is not possible to assess this with any degree of confidence.

The content of the speech itself also contains valuable hints as to the leadership's perspectives on the current moment. Back in 2017, Xi sold the Chinese people on a utopian promise: "There is no such thing as a free lunch," he said, "but by exerting yourself through struggle, dreams can come true (天上不会掉馅饼, 努力奋斗才能梦想成真)." While this year's speech noted that "countless workers, builders, and entrepreneurs are striving to fulfill their dreams ... (无数劳动者、建设者、创业者, 都在为梦想拼搏 ...)," toward the end of his remarks Xi gave a more concise and conciliatory version of this 2017 statement. "Dreams may be far away, but if you pursue them, they can be achieved (梦虽遥, 追则能达)."

The admission that the "China dream (中国梦)" is still a long way off is an unusual moment of candor, not least for where it arrives in the speech ([China Brief](#), September 25, 2014). The moment comes at the start of the final segment before Xi's signoff, directly after noting "changes unseen in a century (世界百年变局)" and as a segue into discussing the road to "Chinese modernization (中国式现代化)," two slogans that define Xi's diagnosis of and prognosis for world affairs perhaps more than any others. While this placement is noteworthy, the omission of Xi's lodestar, the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation (中华民族伟大复兴)" is even more unusual, as it is a concept that has often been closely connected to the China Dream and a mainstay of previous speeches ([UDN](#), January 1; [YouTube/VOA](#), January 4).

One possibility for these changes could be that Xi has one eye on the international audience. As the PRC moves into 2025, its export-driven economy is increasingly reliant on maintaining favorable relations with countries around the world. As such, many of Xi's remarks had an international focus. He described the PRC as a "responsible major country (负责任大国)" in a "turbulent world (世界变乱交织)" that has "actively promoted changes in global governance and deepened solidarity and cooperation in the global South (积极推动全球治理变革, 深化全球南方团结合作)" and has "put a lot of positive energy into maintaining world peace and stability (为维护世界和平稳定注入更多正能量)." The "responsible major country" reference is a pointed critique of the United States, which it sees as a destabilizing force, as is the clip shown of a medal ceremony from the Paris Olympics in the summer, in which the PRC flag is raised above that of its rival.

Another possibility is that the economic situation at home really is causing reassessment. Xi makes frequent references to this throughout the speech. He claims that he "has been concerned about issues such as employment and income, the need for families to care simultaneously for both the old and the young, as well education and medical issues (对大家关心的就业增收、'一老一小'、教育医疗等问题, 我一直挂念)." He also warns that the economy "is facing some new circumstances, there is the challenge of uncertainty in the external environment and pressure of transformation from old growth drivers into new one (运行面临一些新情况, 有外部环境不确定性的挑战, 有新旧动能转换的压力)." These are clear signals that he acknowledges domestic issues, and are echoed by remarks made to the CPPCC tea party the same day, where he warned that Chinese modernization would entail "not only clear skies and

gentle breezes but also fierce storms and even turbulent waves (不仅有风和日丽，也会有疾风骤雨甚至惊涛骇浪)” ([People's Daily](#), January 1).

The solutions he offers are also concerning and support the view that his dreams—and those of the Chinese people—may have to be deferred. In his speech, he turns to work ethic and nationalism to rally support for the year ahead. He exhorts people to be confident, arguing that “we get stronger through hard times (我们在历经考验中壮大).” At one point, he uses a graphic metaphor, proclaiming that the word “China (中国)” is engraved at the bottom of the “*hezun* (何尊)” (an ancient bronze vessel that contains the earliest known reference to “中国”), but “even more so in the hearts of every Chinese child (更铭刻在每个华夏儿女心中).” What is left unspoken is that the party-state’s repressive apparatus—currently on high alert—will coerce those who do not wish to “eat bitterness (吃苦)” ([People's Daily](#), May 28, 2023; [China Brief](#), December 6, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Xi’s conviction that the people must be willing to suffer and struggle to achieve his ambitions has been made clear beyond his new year’s speech. At the plenary session of the Central Committee for Discipline Inspection the following week, Xi warned that “corruption is the greatest threat facing our Party, and the anti-corruption campaign is the most thorough form of self-revolution (腐败是我们党面临的巨大威胁，反腐败是最彻底的自我革命)” ([People's Daily](#), January 7). The communique that came out of the session also noted that the anti-corruption struggle “is still severe and complex (仍然严峻复杂),” and an accompanying commentary called for cadres to be tough on themselves (自身硬) ([People's Daily](#), January 9; [People's Daily](#), January 10). It was also articulated in a speech published in *Qiushi*, the Party’s theory journal, on New Year’s Eve. The speech, which was given to top Party, state, and military leaders in February 2023, includes a section about “the necessity of advancing with great struggle (必须进行伟大斗争)” in order to achieve national rejuvenation ([Qiushi](#), December 31, 2024).

The new year holds great uncertainty for the PRC. Politically, Xi has reengaged with his most important international interlocutor, President Donald Trump ([Lianhe Zaobao](#), January 17). The incoming administration’s decisions will have a decisive impact on the PRC’s trajectory. Economically, Xi will hope that the economic plans set out between the Third Plenum in July 2024 and the Central Economic Work Conference in December will start to bear fruit. Ultimately, this could be the year that Xi Jinping comes to know whether his dreams will have to be deferred momentarily, or if they will be derailed altogether.

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**Assessment of PLA Leaders at the End of 2024**

*By Kenneth W. Allen*



Ministry of National Defense compound. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- The size and scope of the Central Military Commission (CMC) has reduced dramatically since 2004, and the makeup of the military leadership is expected to change completely by the end of the decade. It is not clear what impact this turnover will have on the PLA's ability to conduct war if needed.
- Retirement norms indicate that only one of the two CMC vice chairmen will remain in position along with a new director of the CMC Political Work Department after the 21st Party Congress in 2027, while nine of the current 23 PLA leaders will change. The 11 other leaders will likely retire within one or two years of the congress.
- The current CMC only has five people, due to the removal of director of the Political Work Department Miao Hua for corruption and the continued absence of the defense minister from the CMC.
- Defense minister Dong Jun represents an apparent demotion for the defense ministry. His reduced ability to advocate for military affairs within the State Council and during national policy-setting could complicate the military-to-military relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States.

This article identifies all the key People's Liberation Army (PLA) leaders at the end of 2024. It also discusses recent changes to the makeup of that leadership, including those that have resulted from corruption investigations as well as surveying changes that are likely to take place by the 21st Chinese Communist Party (CCP) National Congress, set to take place in late 2027. Retirement age norms have varied throughout the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and there are always exceptions. Currently, it appears that the norm is that the central military commission (CMC) vice chairmen can remain on active duty until they are 70 years old but that all other senior leaders, including CMC members, service commanders, and theater command commanders must retire at age 65. However, there are always exceptions that allow them to remain in their billet after they have met their mandatory age requirement.

The senior leadership will look completely different than it is today by 2029 as a result. After 2027, only one of the two CMC vice chairmen will remain in position along with a new director of the CMC Political Work Department, while nine of the current leaders will retire at or before the 21st Party Congress and 11 other leaders, who will be 63 or 64 years old, will most likely retire within one or two years of the congress. Of note, each service and theater command have their own party congress, which normally takes place two years after the National Party Congress. However, leadership changes normally take place at the national congresses ([CASI](#), April 12, 2021). The key billets that are addressed in this article include:

- The two vice chairmen and three members of the CCP and state central military commissions (CMC), including the chief of the Joint Staff Department, the director of the Political Work Department, and the secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission.
- The commanders and political commissars for the four services—the PLA Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force.
- The commanders and political commissars of the five theater commands—Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central.

It is not clear what the impact on the overall leadership changes will have on the PLA's ability to conduct war if needed, but a better understanding of who the key decisionmakers are provides a starting point for assessing the PLA's readiness.

### **Changing Makeup of the CMC Membership in the 21st Century**

The membership of the Central Military Commission has changed substantially in the 21st Century and especially in the last decade following thoroughgoing organizational reforms that began in 2016 (China Brief, [February 4, 2016](#); [February 23, 2016](#); [April 26, 2024](#)). The major changes announced during party congresses, which have reduced the size and scope of the CMC dramatically since 2004, are shown in the bullets below ([RAND](#), 2002; [DGI](#), July 17, 2018): **[1]**

- 16th Party Congress (2002): Chairman Jiang Zemin, two vice chairmen, including the concurrent defense minister; four members (chief of the General Staff Department, director of the General Political Department, director of the General Logistics Department, and director of the General Armament Department).

- 2004: The commanders of the PLA Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force were added as members.
- 17th Party Congress (2007): Chairman Hu Jintao, two vice chairmen, eight members (defense minister, chief of the General Staff Department, director of the General Political Department, director of the General Logistics Department, director of the General Armament Department, and commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force).
  - Xi Jinping was added as a civilian vice chairman in 2010.
- 18th Party Congress (2012): Chairman Xi Jinping (no civilian vice chairman since 2012), two vice chairmen, eight members (same billets as 2007).
- 19th Party Congress (2017): Chairman Xi Jinping, two vice chairmen, four members (defense minister, chief of Joint Staff Department, director of the Political Work Department, secretary of the newly created Discipline Inspection Commission. The directors of the CMC Logistic Support Department and Equipment Development Department and the service commanders were not added.
- 20th Party Congress (2022): Chairman Xi Jinping, two vice chairmen, four members (same billets as 2017).
  - As discussed below. However, the defense minister has been replaced and is no longer on the CMC and the director of the Political Work Department has been removed and has not yet been replaced. As a result, the CMC currently only has 5 people.

Prior to 2016, the four CMC general departments (General Staff, General Political, General Logistics, and General Armament) served first as the army headquarters and second as the joint headquarters. These were supplanted in 2016 by a standalone army headquarters and 15 organizations under the CMC with joint responsibilities. In 2004, the commanders of the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force (the precursor to the Rocket Force, formed in 2016), became CMC members. However, they were not added as members during the 19th Party Congress in 2017.

Changes have also taken place within the senior leadership itself. For instance, in August 2024, the commanders of the northern and central theater commands, Wang Qiang (王强) and Huang Ming (黄铭), respectively, switched jobs ([Liaoning Government](#), August 2, 2024; [Singtao Daily](#), August 2, 2024). In addition, Wu Ya'nan (吴亚男) has been the commander in the Southern Theater Command since July 2024 and previously served as the commander in the Central Theater Command from January 2022 to January 2023, while Lin Xiangyang (林向阳) has served as the commander of the Eastern Theater Command since January 2022 and previously served as the commander of the Central Theater Command from August 2021 to January 2022 ([Wikipedia/Southern Theater Command](#), accessed January 15; [Wikipedia/Central Theater Command](#), accessed January 15). This is not unusual: Seven different officers have served as commanders in two different military regions since the 1950s. These situations provide opportunities for officers to move up in their career path and to improve jointness within the PLA. For example, Liang Guanglie (梁光烈) served as the commander of the Shenyang Military Region in 1997–1999 and then as the commander of the Nanjing Military Region from 1999–2002. He then served as the chief of the General Staff Department in 2002–2007 and the defense minister in 2008–2013 ([Wikipedia/Liang Guanglie](#), accessed January 15).



**Table 1: PLA Leaders in December 2024 [2]**

Billet	Name	YOB (2027)	Rank	Grade	SVC	Assumed Billet	CCP Politburo	CCP Central Committee	NPC Delegate
CMC VC	Zhang Youxia (张又侠)	1950 (77)	GEN (2011)	CMC VC	A	10/2017	19th and 20th CCP PB		
	He Weidong (何卫东)	1957 (70)	GEN (2019)	CMC VC	A	10/2022	20th CCP PB		13th NPC
DefMin	Dong Jun (董军)	1961 (66)	ADM (2021)	TC LDR*	N	12/2023			
Chief JSD (CMC MBR)	Liu Zhenli (刘振立)	1964 (63)	GEN (2021)	CMC MBR	A	10/2022		19th CC	12th NPC
Dir, PWD (CMC MBR)	Miao Hua (苗华)	1955 (72)	ADM (2015)	CMC MBR	N	10/2017 – 12/2024		19th & 20th CC	
Sec, DIC (CMC MBR)	Zhang Shengmin (张升民)	1948 (79)	GEN (2017)	CMC MBR	A	10/2017		19th CC	
PLAA CDR	Li Qiaoming (李桥铭)	1961 (66)	GEN (2019)	TC LDR	A	9/2022		19th CC	
PLAA PC	Chen Hui (陈辉)	1963 (64)	GEN (2024)	TC LDR	A	12/2024*			
PLAN CDR	Hu Zhongming (胡中明)	1964 (63)	GEN (2023)	TC LDR	N	12/2023			
PLAN PC	Yuan Huazhi (袁华智)	1961 (66)	ADM (2022)	TC LDR	N	01/2022			
PLAAF CDR	Chang Dingqiu (常丁求)	1967 (60)	GEN (2021)	TC LDR	AF	9/2021		19th CC Alt; 20th CC	
PLAAF PC	Guo Puxiao (郭普校)	1964 (63)	GEN (2020)	TC LDR	AF	01/2022			
PLARF CDR	Wang Houbin (王厚斌)	1961 (66)	GEN (2023)	TC LDR	RF	07/2023			
PLARF PC	Xu Xisheng (徐西盛)	1964 (63)	GEN (2023)	TC LDR	RF	07/2023		20th CC	13th NPC
ETC CDR	Lin Xiangyang (林向阳)	1964 (63)	GEN (2021)	TC LDR	A	01/2022			
ETC PC	Liu Qingsong (刘青松)	1963 (64)	ADM (2022)	TC LDR	A	06/2023			
STC CDR	Wu Ya'nan (吴亚男)	1962 (65)	GEN (2022)	TC LDR	A	07/2024			
STC PC	Wang Wenquan (王文全)	1962 (65)	GEN (2023)	TC LDR	A	12/2023		20th CC	13th NPC
WTC CDR	Wang Haijiang (汪海江)	1963 (64)	GEN (2021)	TC LDR	A	08/2021			13th NPC
WTC PC	Li Fengbiao (李凤彪)	1959 (68)	GEN (2019)	TC LDR	A	06/2021		19th CC	
NTC CDR	Wang Qiang (王强)	1963 (64)	GEN (2022)	TC LDR	AF	09/2022		20th CC	
NTC CDR	Zheng Xuan (郑璇)	1964 (63)	GEN (2023)	TC LDR	A	06/2023			
CTC CDR	Huang Ming (黄铭)	1963 (64)	GEN (2023)	TC LDR	A	01/2023		20th CC	13th NPC
CTC PC	Xu Deqing (徐德清)	1963 (64)	GEN (2022)	TC LDR	A	01/2022			

\*Preceded by QIN Shutong (秦树桐) from January 2022 to December 2024.

A shift in the process for rank promotions to 3 stars (General and Admiral) constitutes an additional change to the PLA leadership in recent years. Prior to December 2019, all 3-star promotions occurred up to three years after the officer assumed the grade of Military Region or Theater Command leader in a new billet ([China Brief](#), July 22, 2010; [August 5, 2010](#); USAF CASI, [September 20, 2021](#); [February 9, 2022](#); [July 8, 2024](#)). [3] However, beginning in December 2019, virtually all 3-star promotions have occurred simultaneously with a grade promotion assigned to a new billet. This is a result of the PLA's slow shift to a "rank-centric system" that began as a result of the major reorganization starting in 2016 ([China Brief](#), January 30, 2017; [CASI](#), July 8, 2024). Although the PLA's organizational structure and rank system have been based on the 15-grade and 10-rank system since the 1980s, the shift to a corps-brigade structure rather than a corps-division-regiment structure has created problems in how officers move up their career path and has affected the chain of command structure. So far, shifting to a "rank-centric system" has been a very slow process that has focused primarily on the 3-star and Theater Command Leader grade.

Table 1 above provides a list of the current 24 leaders, including their billet, English and Chinese name, year of birth (YOB) and age in 2027, rank, grade, service (SVC), date they assumed their billet, whether they were a member of the 19th CCP Politburo, the CCP Central Committee, and/or the 12th National People's Congress (NPC), as announced in 2017 and 2018, or whether they are a member of the current 20th CCP Politburo, the CCP Central Committee, and/or the 13th NPC, as announced in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

### **Defense Ministers and Corruption Issues**

Changes in the CMC normally occur during the Party Congress held every five years. Historically, however, the new defense minister is not officially added to the CMC as a member and is not officially named as the defense minister until he assumes his position at the National People's Congress that takes place in the spring following the Party Congress, as it is a state rather than a Party position. For example, although Liang Guanglie (梁光烈) was replaced as the chief of the General Staff Department at the 17th Party Congress, he stayed on the CMC without an assigned position. Once the National People's Congress officially selected him as the defense minister in March 2008, he assumed his CMC member position and was listed first in protocol order (the hierarchical order of authority). As such, although the 18th Party Congress was held in November 2012, the next defense minister, General Chang Wanquan (常万全), was not officially named until he assumed his position at the 12th National People's Congress in early 2013.

The People's Republic of China has had three ministers of national defense (aka defense ministers) since the 13th National People's Congress in March 2018. At that time, Rocket Force General Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) replaced Army General Chang Wanquan. Wei was then replaced by Army General Li Shangfu (李尚福) at the 14th National People's Congress in March 2023 following Wei's removal on corruption charges. However, Li also was removed from office in October 2023 for corruption and was replaced by Navy Admiral Dong Jun (董军). Corruption apparently continues to be a wider issue that is present at the highest levels of the PLA. Most recently, Admiral Miao Hua (苗华) was removed from his position as the director of the Political Work Department in December 2024 due to corruption issues, but he has not yet been replaced ([China Brief](#), December 3, 2024). It is most likely that Miao's replacement will be named in early 2025, perhaps at the next plenary session of the CCP Central Committee so that it can be done by a majority vote. Of note, Miao's

name still appears on the MND website in English and Chinese ([MND](#), accessed January 15). However, unlike his predecessors, Defense Minister Dong Jun's name is not listed on either site.

Dong Jun represents a departure from his predecessors in terms of the number of other positions he holds. Chang, Wei, and Li all served concurrently as CMC members and State Council councilors. Dong, meanwhile, has not been assigned either billet. It is not clear why this is the case, but it indicates that he wields significantly less power. It also suggests that Xi Jinping is punishing the Ministry of National Defense for its being politically unreliable following the corruption charges that brought down Dong's two predecessors. According to a RAND report by Mei and Blasko, rather than having direct access to Xi Jinping, Dong may now be required to report first to either a CMC vice chairman or perhaps even one of the three CMC members ([RAND](#), August 14, 2024). In the State Council, Dong is outranked by Wang Xiaohong (王晓红), a state councilor and minister of public security. This suggests a limited role for Dong as an advocate for military affairs within the State Council and during national policy-setting. It also represents an apparent demotion for the defense ministry and could complicate the military-to-military relationship between the PRC and the United States.

### **Retirement Ages Indicate Overhaul by 2027**

Retirement norms for CMC members appear to have consolidated during Hu Jintao's (胡锦涛) leadership of the CMC from September 2004 to November 2012, according to the scholar Alice Miller ([DGI](#), July 17, 2018). Under the 1994 revision of the 1988 "Active Service Regulations," a specific retirement age of 65 was stipulated for PLA officers up to the grade of military region leader, while regular CMC members were expected to retire at 70 with the possibility under some circumstances of retiring at 72. There was no age limit for CMC vice chairmen ([NPCSC](#), May 1, 1994). [4]

The CMC member retirement norm seemed to coincide with the emergence of the same norm for members of the CCP politburo, as evidenced by the appointments made at the First Plenum of the 15th Central Committee in 1997 ([DGI](#), July 17, 2018). However, this latter retirement age was apparently lowered to 68 at the 16th Party Congress in 2002, a norm that remained in place at the subsequent party congress in 2007. At that time, it was confirmed as an established internal norm for the politburo by PRC media, supplementing longstanding party regulations establishing explicit norms for retirement of cadres in party organs below the Politburo ([DGI](#), July 17, 2018).

According to the various laws governing military service, personnel holding the grade of military region leader (正大军区职)—now theater command leader (正战区职)—have a mandatory retirement age of 65 ([Baijiahao](#), May 16, 2023). This is corroborated by a review of service and theater command leaders over the past several years, which also suggests that they have a maximum retirement age of 65.

Tables 2–4 below provide an overview of the officers who served in the key leadership billets in 2007–2012 (Table 2), 2012–2017 (Table 3), and 2017–2022 (Table 4). Each table notes which service they belonged to and what their status was following the party congress based on their age and billet—namely, whether they retained their billet, changed billets, or retired. Of note, prior to the 19th Party Congress in 2017, the CMC members also included the directors of the General Logistics Department and the General Armament

Department. However, like the service commanders, they were not added in 2017. The following three tables do not include them. It is also worth noting that the secretary of the CMC Discipline Inspection Commission was added in 2017.

**Table 2: CMC from 2007–2012**

Person (Service)	Billet	YOB	Age in 2012	Status in 2012
Guo Boxiong (A)	VC	1942	70	Retired
Xu Caihou (A)	VC	1943	69	Retired
Liang Guanglie* (A)	MBR; DefMin	1940	72	Retired
Chen Bingde (A)	MBR; Chief of General Staff, GSD	1941	71	Retired
Li Jinai	MBR; Dir, GPD	1942	70	Retired
Jing Zhiyuan (SAF)	MBR; PLASAF CDR	1944	68	Retired
Wu Shengli (N)	MBR; PLAN CDR	1945	67	MBR
Xu Qiliang (AF)	MBR; PLA AF CDR	1950	62	VC

\*In 2007, the defense minister ceased being a concurrent vice chairman but has remained first in protocol order for the members.

**Table 3: CMC from 2012–2017**

Member (Service)	Billet	YOB	Age in 2012	Status in 2017
Fan Changlong (A)	VC	1947	65	Retired
Xu Qiliang (AF)	VC	1950	62	VC
Chang Wanquan (A)	MBR; DefMin	1949	63	Retired
Fang Fenghui (A)	MBR; Chief of General/Joint Staff, GSD/JSD	1951	61	Retired
Zhang Yang (A)	MBR; Dir, GPD/PWD)	1951	61	Retired
Wu Shengli (N)	MBR; PLAN CDR)	1945	67	Retired
Ma Xiaotian (AF)	MBR; PLA AF CDR	1949	63	Retired
Wei Fenghe (SAF/RF)	MBR; PLASAF / PLARF CDR	1954	58	MBR/ DefMin

**Table 4: CMC from 2017–2022**

Person	Billet	YOB	Age in 2022	2022 Status
Xu Qiliang (AF)	VC	1950	72	Retired
Zhang Youxia (A)	VC	1950	72	VC
Wei Fenghe (RF)	MBR; DefMin	1954	68	Retired
Li Zuocheng (A)	MBR; Chief of Joint Staff	1953	64	Retired
Miao Hua (N but career A)	MBR; Dir, PWD	1955	67	Remained
Zhang Shengmin (A)	MBR; Secretary, DIC	1958	64	Remained

Table 5 lists the current leaders and provides predictions about their status by the time of the 21st Party Congress in late 2027. Of the six CMC leaders today, only two—He Weidong (何卫东) and Liu Zhenli (刘振立)—are likely to remain. Liu (currently chief of the Joint Staff Department) may join He as a vice chairman. Meanwhile, service and theater command commanders and political commissars must retire when they reach age 65, while anyone under 65 can possibly remain until they reach that age. However, there are always exceptions to the rules where some might retire at age 63 or 64, or conversely remain on active duty after age 65.

**Table 5: PLA Leaders in 2027**

Billet	Name	YOB (2027)	2027 Status
CMC VC	Zhang Youxia (张又侠)	1950 (77)	Retire
	He Weidong (何卫东)	1957 (70)	Remain
DefMin	Dong Jun (董军)	1961 (66)	Retire
Chief JSD (CMC MBR)	Liu Zhenli (刘振立)	1964 (63)	Remain
DIR, PWD (CMC MBR)	Miao Hua (苗华)	1955 (72)	Replaced in 2025
Sec, DIC (CMC MBR)	Zhang Shengmin (张升民)	1948 (79)	Retire
PLAA CDR	Li Qiaoming (李桥铭)	1961 (66)	Retired
PLAA PC	Chen Hui (陈辉)	1963 (64)	Remain?
PLAN CDR	Hu Zhongming (胡中明)	1964 (63)	Remain?
PLAN PC	Yuan Huazhi (袁华智)	1961 (66)	Retired
PLAAF CDR	Chang Dingqiu (常丁求)	1967 (60)	Remain
PLAAF PC	Guo Puxiao (郭普校)	1964 (63)	Remain?
PLARF CDR	Wang Houbin (王厚斌)	1961 (66)	Retired
PLARF PC	Xu Xisheng (徐西盛)	1964 (63)	Remain?
ETC CDR	Lin Xiangyang (林向阳)	1964 (63)	Remain?
ETC PC	Liu Qingsong (刘青松)	1963 (64)	Remain?
STC CDR	Wu Ya'nan (吴亚男)	1962 (65)	Retire
STC PC	Wang Wenquan (王文全)	1962 (65)	Retire
WTC CDR	Wang Haijiang (汪海江)	1963 (64)	Remain?
WTC PC	Li Fengbiao (李凤彪)	1959 (68)	Retired
NTC CDR	Wang Qiang (王强)	1963 (64)	Remain?
NTC CDR	Zheng Xuan (郑璇)	1964 (63)	Remain?
CTC CDR	Huang Ming (黄铭)	1963 (64)	Remain?
CTC PC	Xu Deqing (徐德清)	1963 (64)	Remain?

## Conclusions

The People’s Republic of China has had five party congresses since 2002. While the number of vice chairmen have remained the same at two, there has been variation in the membership of the Central Military Commission in terms of which organizations are represented. Although there were four members in 2022—the defense minister, the chief of the Joint Staff Department, the director of the Political Work Department, and the secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission—the CMC has been reduced due to corruption issues among some top PLA leaders. In particular, the current defense minister, Admiral Dong Jun, assumed his position following his predecessor’s arrest for corruption, but has not been afforded the same additional roles as a CMC member and state councilor. In addition, Admiral Miao Hua was removed as the director of the Political Work Department in December 2024, but a replacement is yet to be named.

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## Notes

[1] See also the forthcoming volume, Frank Miller, Tung Ho, and Kenneth Allen, eds., *The People's Liberation Army as Organization Volume 3.0* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation; Vienna: Exovera, 2025).

[2] The data for this table is taken from the PLA leaders' individual Wikipedia pages.

[3] N.B. The PLA's military regions structure was supplanted by the theater commands during the 2016 reforms.

[4] For a translation of the 1994 revision of the "Active Service Regulations Governing Active Duty Officers of the PLA," see FBIS Daily Report-China, 17 May 1994, p.35–40. See also the discussion in James Mulvenon, *Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps: Trends and Implications*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1997), pp. 38–43.

## Appendix

This appendix provides a list of the acronyms and abbreviations used in the report along with the full term and Chinese term if relevant.

Acronym / Abbreviation	Full Term	Chinese Term
A	Army	陆军
ADM	Admiral	海军上将
AF	Air Force	空军
Alt	Alternate	
CC	Central Committee	中央委员会
CCP	Chinese Communist Party	中国共产党
CDR	Commander	司令员
CMC	Central Military Commission	中央军事委员会/中央军委
CTC	Central Theater Command	中部战区
DefMin	Defense Minister	国防部长
DIC	Discipline Inspection Commission	纪律检查委员会
DIR	Director	部长
ETC	Eastern Theater Command	东部战区
GEN	General	上将
JSD	Joint Staff Department	联合参谋部
LDR	Leader	
MBR	Member	委员
MND	Ministry of National Defense	国防部
MOD	Ministry of Defense	国防部
N	Navy	海军
NPC	National People's Congress	全国人民代表大会
NTC	Northern Theater Command	北部战区
PB	Politburo	政治局
PC	Political Commissar	政治委员/政委
PLA	People's Liberation Army	中国人民解放军
PLAA	PLA Army	中国人民解放军陆军

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PLAAF	PLA Air Force	中国人民解放军空军
PLAN	PLA Navy	中国人民解放军海军
PLARF	PLA Rocket Force	中国人民解放军火箭军
PLASAF	PLA Second Artillery Force	中国人民解放军第二炮兵
PRC	People's Republic of China	中华人民共和国
PWD	Political Work Department	政治工作部
STC	Southern Theater Command	南部战区
SVC	Service	军中
TC	Theater Command	战区
VC	Vice Chairman	副主席
WTC	Western Theater Command	西部战区
YOB	Year Birth	

**The Four Main Groups Challenging Xi Jinping**

*By Willy Lam*



The politburo standing committee attends the New Year's Eve tea party. (Source: [Gov.cn](http://Gov.cn))

**Executive Summary:**

- Xi Jinping faces challenges to his authority from four main groups: retired party elders such as Li Ruihuan and Wen Jiabao; princelings, especially those based overseas; military leaders, such as Zhang Youxia; and parts of the middle and entrepreneurial classes who are voicing their discontent.
- Xi is unlikely to be overthrown or face a coup, but his ability to force through his agenda may be reduced.
- Indicators that Xi is embattled include his absence from chairing two recent high-level meetings, references to “collective leadership” the *PLA Daily* newspaper, and an adjustment to PRC diplomacy to a more conciliatory approach, especially toward the United States.
- This apparent reduction in power could be a result of the country's bleak economic situation, which Xi's policies from last year have not resolved.

Xi Jinping is in political trouble. The supreme leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) faces challenges from multiple groups, including from retired politburo standing committee members, fellow princelings, some of the military top brass, and even from some in the country's middle class. As a result, his ability to shape policy in the financial, foreign affairs, and other arenas has been truncated. It might be far-fetched to speculate that Xi, the so-called “eternal core of the Party (永远党的核心),” might be driven out of office this year, but it is crucial to understand who his enemies are and how they challenge the commander-in-chief.

The *PLA Daily*, the official newspaper of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), recently have championed the virtues of “collective leadership (集体领导).” This could be interpreted as a slap in the face of Xi's insistence since he came to power in 2012 on the dictum that all decisions should “rely on a single voice of authority (定于一尊)” ([PLA Daily](#), December 9, 2024; [Radio Free Asia](#), December 18, 2024).

Xi's clout over economic decision-making appears to have been reduced. The Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission and the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission, which are the two major high-level party platforms for promulgating economic and financial policies that Xi leads, have ceased to meet regularly ([Fitch Ratings](#), December 16, 2024; [State Council](#), January 5; [Radio Free Asia](#), January 10). This could be due to the underwhelming results of the massive program of monetary and fiscal quantitative easing—known to Chinese officials as “using ample water to undertake massive irrigation (大水漫灌)” —that has been executed since September ([China Brief](#), October 11, 2024).

The PRC also seems to be enacting a temporary adjustment to its foreign policy. Faced with lackadaisical prospects for exports as well as the coordinated withdrawal from the PRC of multinationals based in the United States and its allies, Xi has been forced to jettison the typically abrasive brand of “wolf warrior” diplomacy, instead emphasizing eagerness to improve relations with Washington and the West ([VOA Chinese](#), November 17, 2024; [CCTV](#), January 4; [CGTN](#), January 11). This shift is underlined by rumors that Xi intends to send a senior official to the inauguration of U.S. President Donald Trump on January 20 ([World Journal](#), January 11).

### **Xi Face Four Challengers**

#### *Retired Politburo Standing Committee Members*

Xi has imposed heavy restrictions on the activities and movements of party elders since his first day in office. These former party heavyweights, often retired members of the Politburo Standing Committee, include supporters of the market-oriented policies of Deng Xiaoping, key economic officials under former premiers Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao, and former top government advisors such as Li Ruihuan (李瑞环). Security staff reporting to Xi Jinping's office have changed the personnel who work for these men, such as their secretaries and drivers, and disallowed them from holding meetings or travelling to other parts of country without the approval of the supreme leader ([Radio Free Asia](#), January 10).

Behind closed doors, many of these elders have expressed disapproval of Xi's handling of economic issues and relations with the United States since the third plenary session of the 20th CCP Central Committee last

July (China Brief, [July 23](#); [July 26](#)). At a banquet on the eve of the country's National Day on October 1, 2024, Wen Jiabao and Li Ruihuan sat on either side of Xi ([Lianhe Zaobao](#), September 30, 2024). This was regarded as a subtle signal by Xi that he was receptive to advice or warnings from former senior leaders, even if they lack the authority to remove him. Their barely concealed critique of Xi's policy-making prowess suggests the supreme leader may be increasingly at odds with parts of the CCP's top echelon ([Vision Times](#), August 17, 2024; [Nikkei](#), October 24, 2024).

### *Princelings*

The possession of “red genes (红色基因)” has traditionally been a prerequisite for accession to top leadership positions ([Qiushi](#), March 13, 2024). Xi, a princeling himself, has spent years attempting to marginalize those he regards as potential competitors. Such maneuvering predates his promotion to CCP general secretary, with prominent targets including as Bo Xilai (薄熙来), whose father Bo Yibo (薄一波) was one of the so-called “Eight Immortals” (Party elders who held substantial sway at the end of the 20th Century), and General Liu Yuan (刘源), son of Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇), the former state president who was at one time considered a potential successor to Mao.

Many princelings have become Xi's fiercest critics, especially those based overseas. Many of these individuals grew rich through leveraging their sterling political and business connections in the PRC, before parking billions of dollars of accumulated wealth in North America and Europe and subsequently exiting the PRC with their families. To ensure that they are not harassed by their chosen countries of residence, a number of these former cadres have opted to cooperate with local intelligence agencies. The information they have provided likely includes kompromat against Xi Jinping, though it is unclear what this might include, or how it could be used against him ([The Economist](#), April 4, 2024; [Radio Free Asia](#), January 10).

### *Military Top Brass*

Xi's loss of substantial control over personnel arrangements among the PLA top brass became obvious when several high-level meetings of senior officers were hosted by General Zhang Youxia (张又侠), the first-ranked vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, the top-level body that controls the military. Xi was absent from those meetings ([MND](#), September 13, 2024; [MND](#), October 22, 2024). A veteran of the military forces' equipment procurement and missile forces, Zhang was the boss of the two defense ministers—Generals Li Shangfu (李尚福) and Wei Fenghe (魏凤和)—that Xi fired in 2023 and 2024, respectively. The recent investigation of the director of the CMC Political Work Department, Admiral Miao Hua (苗华), as well as that of around a dozen rising stars in the PLA Navy, may be a result of Xi's opponents in the PLA trying to get rid of his loyalists, including a number of officers who had worked with Xi during his time in Fujian Province in 1985–2002 (RFI, [November 30, 2024](#); [December 23, 2024](#)).

Zhang is unlikely to seek to overthrow Xi. This is in part because of the ingrained tradition of the Party's “absolute leadership (绝对领导)” over the military, and in part because Zhang is due to retire in 2027, at which point he will be aged 77. The military impact of personnel issues at the top of the military remains an open question. Some suggest that it could detract from the perceived ability of the CCP leadership to take over Taiwan and to assert military domination over the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan ([Taiwan](#)



[Institute of Chinese Communist Studies](#), December 31, 2024; [VOAChinese](#), August 30, 2024). The PLA has nevertheless made significant gains in recent years in spite of corruption within its ranks ([U.S. DOD](#), December 2024).

### *Social Unrest*

Social discontent appears to be on the rise in a number of sectors of society where there has been a rise in explicitly anti-Party—and even anti-Xi—activities. These appear to consist largely of victims of Xi's policies, including those that prioritize state-owned enterprises at the expense of private capital, those that have led to mass unemployment for graduates from high-schools and colleges, and those that have created the conditions for the current economic downturn. Members of the middle class who still can get foreign exchange on the black market are voting with their feet by moving overseas. This is in addition to the tens of thousands of mainly low-income Chinese who are estimated to have attempted to flee to the United States via Central America in the past year. Such a journey is treacherous, involving paying organized crime groups and traffickers for passage to the U.S. border ([Wall Street Journal](#), April 16, 2023; [VOA Chinese](#), April 2, 2024; [BBC Chinese](#), April 1, 2024).

An emblematic example is the recent explosion of anti-government feelings in the city of Pucheng, Shaanxi Province. An apparent coverup by authorities following a case of a student jumping to his death from the dormitory of a local vocational college led to violent protests by Chinese citizens expressing growing intolerance of special privilege and extreme censorship. The student, surnamed Dang, had suffered repeated bullying from classmates. As these classmates had Party connections, the local police refused to either open investigations into or provide detailed information about the incident ([CNN](#), January 11; [BBC](#), January 11). This latest story follows a series of violent attacks by citizens aggrieved by the party and government late last year that killed tens of people across the country. Retired and decommissioned soldiers also regularly confront police or People's Armed Police officers with sophisticated weapons and illegally procured fire arms ([NPR](#), November 12, 2024; [China Brief](#), December 3, 2024; [IHR360.com](#), January 8). [1]

### **Conclusion**

The gradual though relentless dwindling of Xi's authority could adversely impact on Beijing's plans to reflate the economy or to repair relations with the West. On the economic side, the monetary and fiscal stimulus announced since September is far from sufficient to assuage local government debt. A January 2025 decision to allow relatively rich localities to issue bonds without central authorization could further exacerbate their indebtedness. Even successful firms in booming sectors are facing problems. For instance, electric vehicle manufacturer BYD has a debt to asset ratio of more than 70 percent, according to Radio Free Asia; and its competitor SAIC has concerns about its profits squeezed by tariffs imposed by the European Union ([Digitimes Asia](#), September 24, 2024; [Sina Finance](#), November 13, 2024; [Radio Free Asia](#), November 27, 2024; [Gov.cn](#), January 10).

On the political side, despite Xi's apparent willingness to engage with the incoming Trump administration, a lack of restraint in the PRC's demonstration of hard power in the South China Sea and that Taiwan Strait suggests he is unlikely to win concessions on export controls in critical technologies. Xi seems uninterested in changing course. The continued lack of reports on his succession planning reinforces the sense that he

intends to remain in power until 2032. Barring major policy shifts, improvements are to be found at the margins through the pursuit of “self-perfection [techniques] (自我完善)” and “self-revolution (自我革命);” in other words, by leaning into asceticism and putting the onus on individuals to be more productive at the expense of changing structural incentives to achieve tangible economic growth ([China Brief](#), January 19, 2024; [CCTV](#), January 8; [People’s Daily](#), January 16).

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### **Notes**

[1] On contentious veterans, see: O’Brien, Kevin J., and Neil J. Diamant. “Contentious Veterans: China’s Retired Officers Speak Out.” *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 3 (2015): 563–81.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48669883>.

**Military Implications of PLA Aircraft Incursions in Taiwan's Airspace 2024**

*By Cheng-kun Ma and K. Tristan Tang*



Four J-20 in formation at Changchun Airshow 2023. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- In 2024, the number of days and sorties involving Chinese military aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line reached a peak, but the total sorties of Chinese aircraft around Taiwan and the number of peak incursion periods were not significantly higher than in 2023.
- While the number of Chinese military aircraft incursions into Taiwan's airspace has surged, the operational capacity of the PLA Eastern Theater Command Air Force is likely already at its maximum peacetime readiness level.
- The sharp increase in Chinese military aircraft incursions targeting Taiwan is not solely aimed at President Ching-te Lai but also reflects changes in the scope and intensity of the PLA's training and exercises around Taiwan.
- Unless new airbases are constructed or logistical support capabilities are significantly improved within the PLA Eastern Theater Command, the number of sorties into Taiwan's airspace is unlikely to increase substantially in 2025

Incursions by military aircraft from the People's Republic of China (PRC) into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) reached unprecedented levels in 2024. Beyond measuring the total number of sorties, the frequency of these incursions and the circumstances surrounding specific missions are also important for assessing the characteristics and implications of People's Liberation Army (PLA) aircraft activities targeting Taiwan. This article utilizes publicly available data on PLA aircraft operations released by Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense.

In 2024, the overall number of sorties and days on which incursions took place continued to rise. However, the percentage of sorties crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait and the frequency of peak incursion periods were not markedly higher than those in 2023. This suggests two things. First, the operational capacity of the PLA's Eastern Theater Command Air Force, which is mainly focused on Taiwan, may have reached its limits; and second, the intensified incursions against Taiwan were conducted not solely to target President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) but also to increase the intensity of trainings.

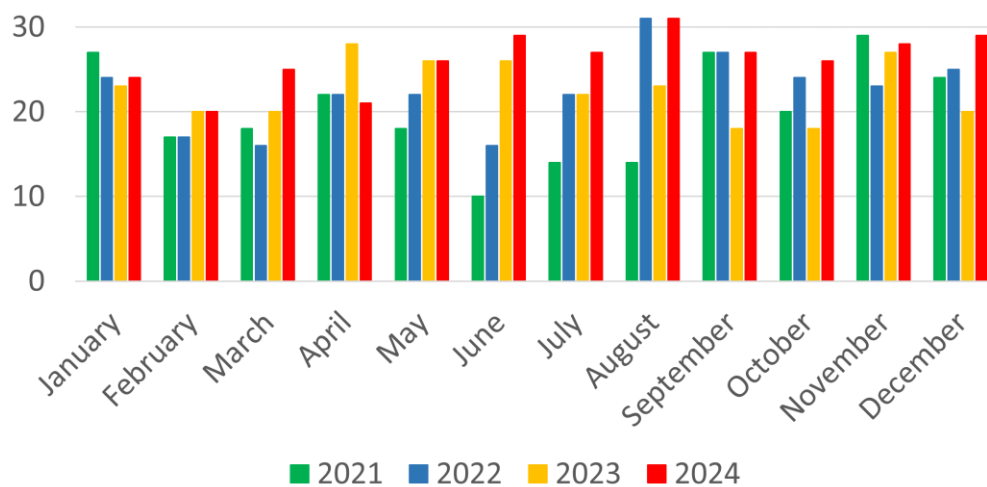
### **Incursions by Chinese Military Aircraft**

We use three indicators to analyze the incursions: the frequency of crossings over the Taiwan Strait median line, the number of sorties crossing the median line as a percentage of the total, and the number of peak incursion periods.

#### *Crossings of the Median Line at Record High*

Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line on more days in 2024 than in any other calendar year on record. (Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense began releasing this data in September 2020.) This figure has risen in the last four years, from 240 crossings in 2021 to 269 in 2022, 271 in 2023, and 313 in 2024. A look at the monthly totals reveals that, in nine of the twelve months of 2024, Chinese aircraft crossed the median line on more days than in the preceding three years (see Figure 1).

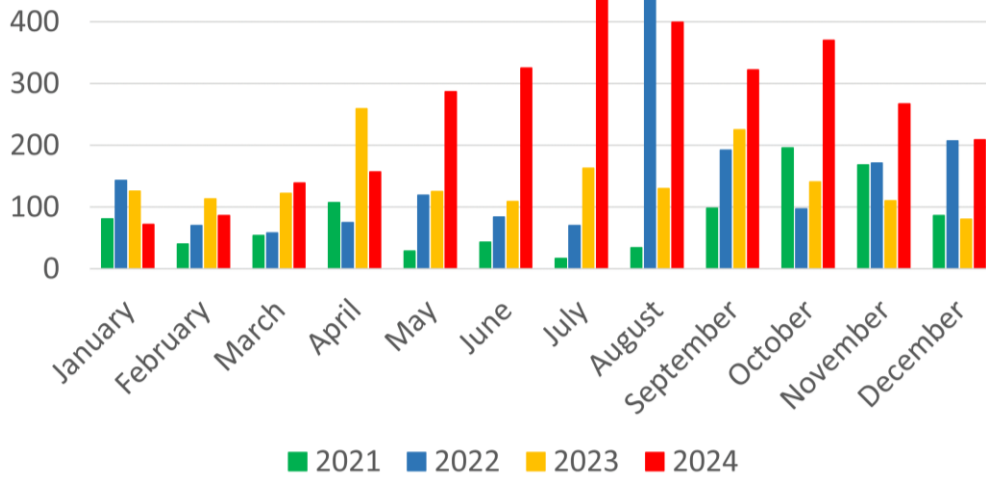
**Figure 1: Monthly Days of Chinese Aircraft Crossing the Taiwan Strait Median Line**



(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)

Second, in 2024, Taiwan’s Ministry of Defense recorded the highest annual number of sorties by PLA aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line since 2021. The annual totals were 953 sorties in 2021, 1,732 in 2022, 1,703 in 2023, and 3,070 in 2024. A further examination of the monthly figures shows that 2024 had the highest monthly totals in eight out of twelve months compared to previous years (see Figure 2).

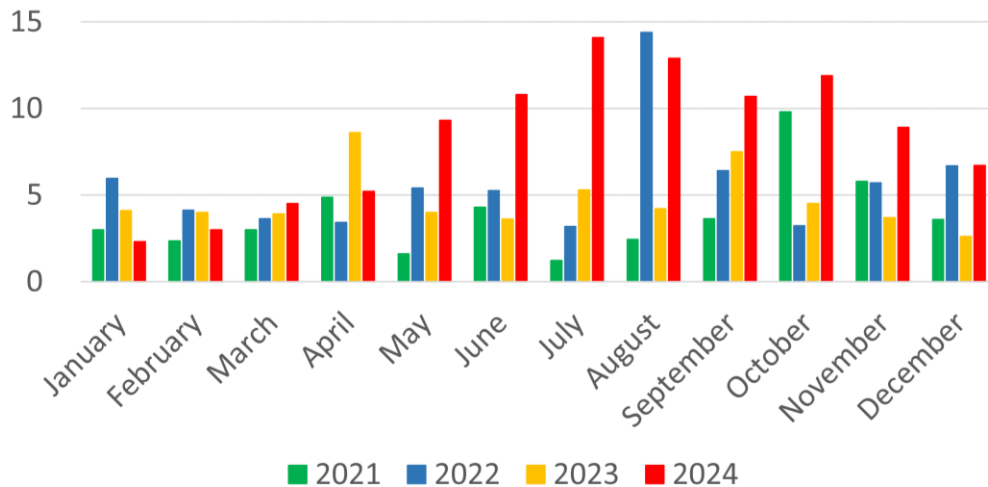
**Figure 2: Monthly Sorties of Chinese Aircraft Crossing the Taiwan Strait Median Line**



(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)

Third, the daily average number of PLA sorties crossing the median line was also higher in 2024 than in any year since 2021. When calculated by dividing the total number of sorties by the number of days with median line crossings, the daily averages were 3.9 sorties in 2021, 5.9 in 2022, 4.7 in 2023, and 8.4 in 2024. [1] A closer examination of the monthly averages reveals that 2024 had the highest monthly averages in nearly every month compared to previous years, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Monthly Average Sorties of Chinese Aircraft Crossing the Taiwan Strait Median Line**



(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)



*Significant Increase in Percentage of Median Line Crossings*

PLA aircraft crossing the median line represents a political violation of a long-standing tacit agreement dividing the two sides of the strait. It also poses a significant military threat. The closer these incursions come to Taiwan, the further the reaction and interception time for Taiwan’s Air Force is reduced. This exerts greater military pressure on Taiwan while simultaneously depleting its air force’s operational readiness. Regardless of whether these aircraft belong to the Eastern Theater Command Air Force or are transiting from other theater commands, they predominantly use the airbases and resources of the Eastern Theater Command and operate under its command and control for activities in and around the Taiwan Strait.

Starting in August 2022, Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense has reported the total number of PLA aircraft detected in the airspace surrounding Taiwan, including both those crossing the median line and those operating west of the median line or around Taiwan’s ADIZ. Two trends emerge from analysis of this data alongside the data on aircraft crossing the median line.

First, unlike the sharp increase in the number of sorties crossing the median line, the total number of Chinese military aircraft detected by Taiwan in 2024 did not rise significantly compared to 2023. In 2023, Taiwan detected a total of 4,711 sorties, while in 2024, the figure was 5,105. This represents an increase of 394 sorties, which is relatively modest—the 1,367 additional sorties that crossed the median line in 2024, indicating that the increase in median line crossings is nearly three times the total increase in sorties. As a result, the number of detected sorties crossing the median as a percentage of total detected sorties rose significantly, from 36.1 percent in 2023 to 60.1 percent in 2024, as shown in Table 1.

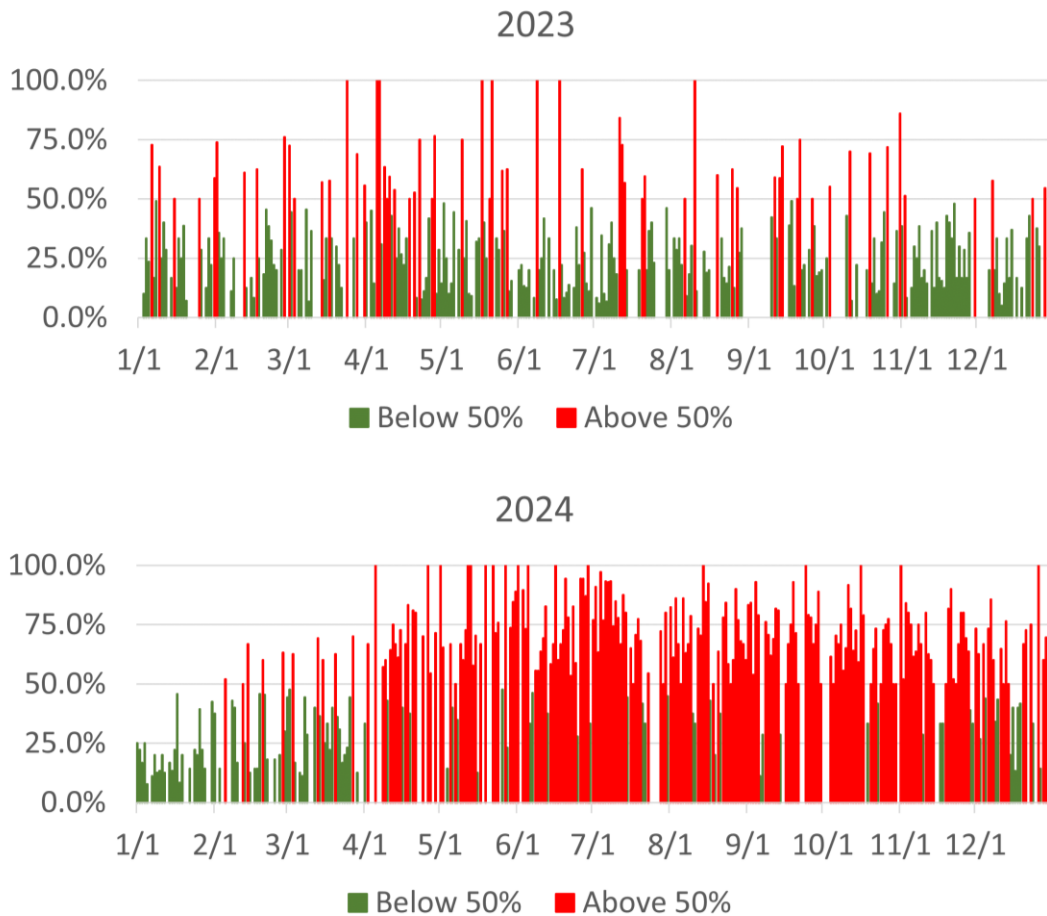
**Table 1: Comparison of the Proportion of Chinese Aircraft Crossing the Taiwan Strait Median Line**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Detected Sorties</b>	<b>Sorties Crossing the Median Line</b>	<b>Percentage of Sorties Crossing the Median Line</b>
2023	4,711	1,703	36.1%
2024	5,105	3,070	60.1%

(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)

Second, the number of days in 2024 when over half of detected Chinese military aircraft crossed the median line was much higher than in 2023. While such instances were relatively rare in 2023, occurring on only 62 days throughout the year, in 2024 these situations became almost routine, occurring on 206 days. This heightens the demand placed on Taiwan’s defensive measures, as it requires a more robust response. For every two detected Chinese aircraft, Taiwan likely needs to prepare one of its own for a potential response or interception, as one of the two Chinese aircraft is likely to cross the median line. Notably, starting in April 2024, on most days over half of the detected Chinese aircraft crossed the median line, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Daily Percentage of Chinese Aircraft Crossing the Median Line**



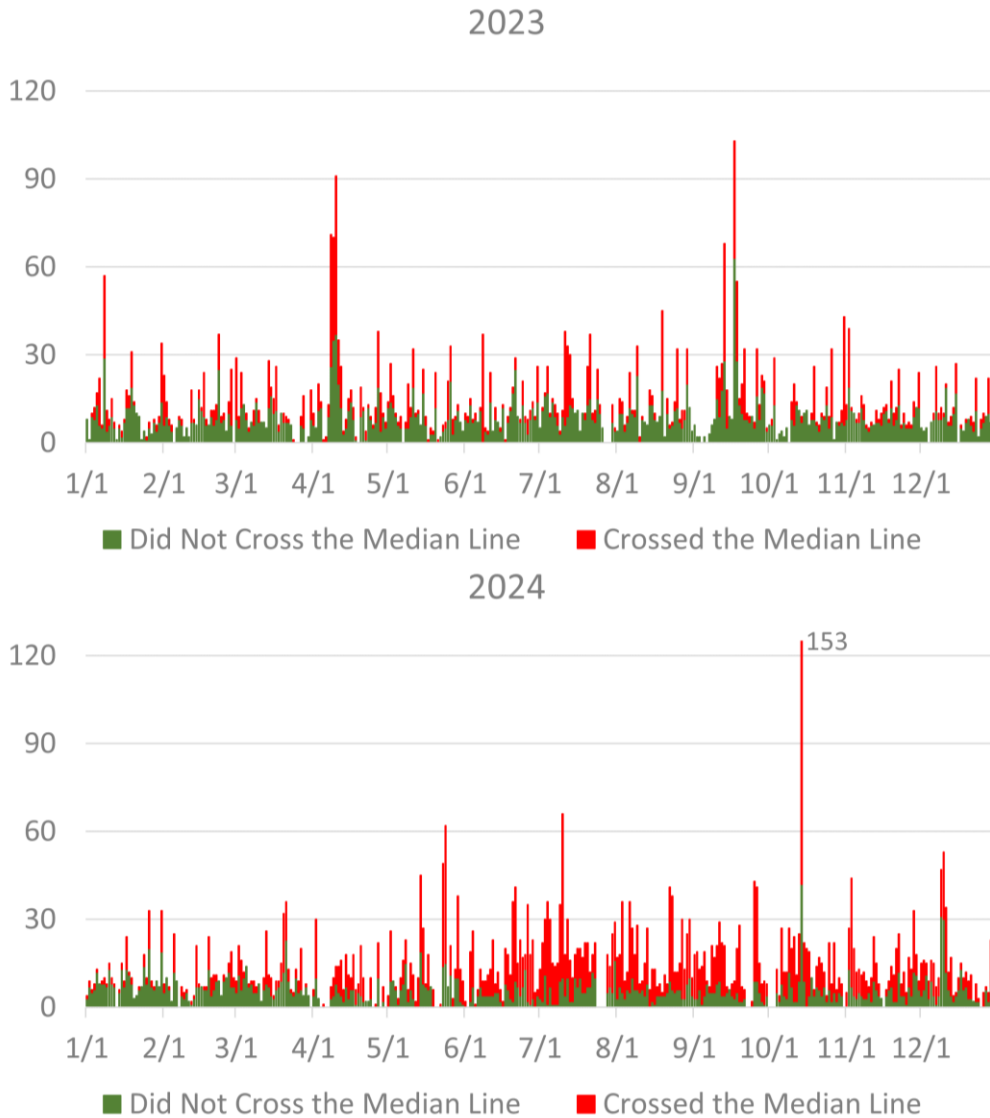
(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)

*Frequency of Peak Incursions: No Significant Increase*

Peak incursion periods are instances where the number of Chinese military aircraft entering Taiwan’s ADIZ exceeds a certain threshold, causing greater-than-usual pressure on Taiwan through their coercive capacity. In this case, we define the threshold as at least 30 aircraft. This is equivalent to roughly one-tenth of Taiwan’s fleet of approximately 300 main fighter aircraft, which includes F-16s, IDFs, and Mirage 2000s. It is practically impossible for every aircraft and its corresponding pilot to be in a state of readiness for immediate deployment and factors such as mechanical issues, scheduled maintenance, equipment upgrades, and personnel rotations limit full operational readiness. This threshold represents a scenario where each of Taiwan’s five Tactical Fighter Wings would need to scramble six aircraft in response.

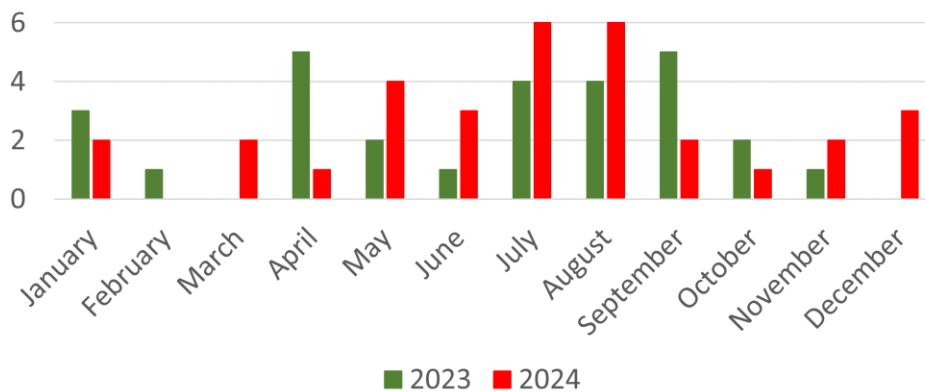
Under this criterion, there were 28 peak incursion days in 2023 and 32 in 2024. This modest increase of only four days contrasts with the upsurge in the total number of PLA aircraft incursions, as shown in Figure 5 and 6.

**Figure 5: Daily Activities of Chinese Military Aircraft Around Taiwan's Surrounding Airspace**



(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)

**Figure 6: Monthly Count of Peak Incursion Periods**



(Source: Compilation by RCDA Based on ROC MND Press Releases)

## **Military Implications**

Two military implications stand out from the data on Chinese military aircraft incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ over the years. These relate to the PLA's operational capacity and the intensification of its training drills.

First, the operational capacity of the Eastern Theater Command Air Force is likely already at its maximum peacetime readiness level. This can be inferred from the overall number of military aircraft detected around Taiwan and the limited increase in peak incursion days. While the number of PLA aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line has risen significantly, the total number of Chinese military aircraft detected around Taiwan has not increased proportionally. This suggests that the noticeable rise in incursions is not due to a surge in the total number of aircraft but rather an increase in the percentage of aircraft crossing the median line. Meanwhile, the minimal increase in the number of peak incursion days indicates that the rise in the annual total of median-line crossings is a result of an increase in the number of days on which incursions take place rather than an increase in high-intensity events on specific days. This implies that Taiwan faces a growing and persistent daily aerial threat from the PRC, rather than sporadic, deliberate actions on specific occasions.

National reunification remains a primary operational focus and training objective for the PLA. With the PRC's overall military budget increasing annually, the PLA Air Force likely has more funding and resources available for training and patrol operations around Taiwan. This should logically lead to a rise in the total number of aircraft sorties. However, the lack of increase to the total number of sorties by Chinese military aircraft around Taiwan in 2024 on the scale seen the previous year may indicate that the Eastern Theater Command Air Force has reached a certain limit in its command and control, logistics, and equipment maintenance capacity. This could explain why, even with additional budget and resources, the number of sorties around Taiwan has not grown significantly.

The lack of an increase in the number of peak incursion periods aligns with this thesis. Chinese airbases typically maintain routine stockpiles of fuel and munitions and schedule logistics personnel for standard operations. Peak incursion periods require greater personnel coordination, resource allocation, and advance planning than normal operations, often necessitating staff recalls or canceling leave as well as the pre-positioning and stockpiling of equipment and fuel. As such, peak periods place significant strain on the operational capacity of the Eastern Theater Command Air Force. If this capacity is insufficient, the number of peak operations that can be executed will inevitably be limited.

Second, the sharp increase in Chinese military aircraft incursions targeting Taiwan reflects changes in the scope and intensity of the PLA's training and exercises around Taiwan. They are not solely intended to respond to the words or actions of President Lai Ching-te. The incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ serve multiple purposes: politically, they aim to pressure the Lai Administration; psychologically, they seek to instill fear within Taiwanese society; and militarily, they enhance the PLA's operational capabilities. When PLA aircraft cross the Taiwan Strait median line, they engage in training drills, combat readiness patrols, or military exercises. In response, Taiwan's Air Force conducts countermeasures and interceptions, providing the PLA Air Force with opportunities to train combat skills, familiarize themselves with the battlefield environment, and strengthen their experience in joint operations.

In 2023, the percentage of PLA aircraft crossing the median line was relatively low, indicating that many trainings or exercises took place outside Taiwan's ADIZ or over mainland PRC airspace, limiting their realism without engagement from Taiwan's Air Force. In contrast, in 2024, the majority of Chinese aircraft detected near Taiwan crossed the median line, meaning more aircraft were subjected to realistic operational scenarios. This shift reflects a deliberate effort by the PRC in 2024 to increase the intensity of its air force training drills.

There are several pieces of supporting evidence that point to this intensification being part of a predetermined plan. First, the surge in peak incursion periods began in April, not after President Ching-te Lai's inauguration in May. This suggests the intensification was not directly tied to Lai's presidency. Second, no peak incursion periods occurred in January 2024, likely due to Xi Jinping's deliberate efforts to avoid provoking anti-China sentiment among Taiwanese voters during Taiwan's presidential election. Following the election, February and March 2024 recorded 10 peak incursion periods, a number comparable to the 11 peak periods recorded during the same months in 2023. Third, the months from January through March marked the early implementation phase of the PRC's annual training plan. During this period, PLA Air Force units likely needed to adjust to changes in the 2024 training agenda and prepare for increased training intensity, making the lack of a significant rise in peak periods during February and March compared to the same period in 2023 plausible.

### **Conclusion**

Incursions by Chinese military aircraft into Taiwan's ADIZ were more intense in 2024 than in previous years. They did not take place solely in response to the election of President Lai Ching-te but reflected an effort to enhance the training intensity of the PLA Air Force.

The Eastern Theater Command Air Force may not substantially increase the number of sorties into Taiwan's airspace in 2025 unless new airbases are constructed or logistical support capabilities are enhanced to address current operational capacity limits.

Incursions into Taiwan's airspace during January, February, November, and December 2025 may reveal patterns in PLA activity. The PLA's annual training schedule typically emphasizes basic training in January and February, while November marks the completion of most annual training plans. As a result, the scale and frequency of activities during these months are lower than in other periods, which explains the relatively fewer incursions during these specific months.

This pattern may be changing, however. The scale of Chinese military aircraft incursions into Taiwan's airspace in November and December 2024 was significantly larger than the typical monthly levels observed from 2021 to 2023. This suggests two possibilities. First, the Eastern Theater Command Air Force's 2024 annual training plan may have included a substantial number of trainings near Taiwan during November and December. Second, the Eastern Theater Command Air Force may have continued patrols or even combat readiness patrols around Taiwan even after completing its 2024 training plan. Both scenarios indicate an effort by the PLA to break the previous pattern of lower operational activity at the beginning and end of the year, aiming to enhance the Air Force's winter combat capabilities.

*The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent the positions of the National Defense University, the Ministry of National Defense, or the government of ROC (Taiwan).*

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### **Notes**

[1] For more analysis on the proportion of Chinese aircraft crossing the Taiwan Strait median line, see, December 7, 2024.



**The Leninist Leash: Control and Mobilization in Beijing's Global Order**

*By Sense Hofstede*



Wang Yi delivers a speech during his annual tour of African nations, January 2025. (Source: [FMPRC](#))

**Executive Summary:**

- Many so-called “Global South” countries feel it is time to do away with what they regard as the double standards of rich countries and are open to alternatives. However, Beijing’s offer comes with a catch: it involves exporting the controlling logic of its party state.
- There are two main steps in the operation of the Leninist party state. First is the organization of targets by enmeshing them in various threads which each have their own logic. These threads only come together in the Party Centre. Second is the mobilization of the targets. This is done by leveraging these ties through the invocation of the language of ideology.
- The Community of Common Destiny for Mankind is the international developmentalist counterpart to the domestic ideology of nationalism. By getting tied up in the three Global Initiatives, developing countries are organized into the “Leninist leash” at various political, economic, and social levels.
- The consequence is an international system that risks becoming more closed off. Widespread verbal compliance creates a collective action problem, while leaders of target countries need to keep in mind the possibility of pushback from all levels at home and abroad.

During his annual year-opening trip to Africa, People's Republic of China (PRC) foreign minister Wang Yi (王毅) called for cooperation to reform global governance. In the view of the PRC, the rise of the Global South, developing countries' right to modernization, and Africa's suffering under "hegemonism" require changes to the international system ([Xinhua](#), January 10). The PRC is prepared to help lead these changes by sharing its own solutions.

The demand exists. The varied global response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and reactions to Israel's conduct in Gaza indicate a sense in the capitals of many so-called "Global South" countries that it is time to do away with what they regard as the double standards of rich countries. Western appeals to a "rules-based international order" are losing some of their attraction.

The PRC offers an alternative, but one that comes with a catch. This is the "Leninist leash." As Beijing proceeds with its efforts to shape the world, it does so by following the operating logic of its own party-state. The unique nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) means that this entails the export of domestic control mechanisms abroad. Just as the rules-based international order has elements of the political structures and values of the countries that were instrumental in founding it—namely, the United States and its allies, the PRC's proposal likewise reflects its own approach to governance.

This consists of bringing everyone and everything within its system of Leninist control before using the various ties it has built to steer people's actions in different arenas, often through mass campaigns. Today, the same leash that keeps the CCP's cadres in line also is in operation abroad. This is the Community of Common Destiny for Mankind (CCDM, 人类命运共同体). [1]

### **The Leninist Leash Within the PRC**

Under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, the Leninist side of the Chinese party-state has gained in strength and cohesion at home. Party structures for dealing with the outside world now also play larger roles, of which the United Front Work Department (UFWD) is only the most notable ([China Brief](#), May 9, 2019). The Party's "organizational weapon" is designed to mobilize people to implement the party line ([RAND](#), 1952). Understanding how Beijing seeks to wield this weapon to safeguard its growing interests overseas requires an understanding of its operation domestically.

A Leninist system exerts its power over people in a two-step process: organization and mobilization. First, subjects are organized into a control structure made up out of overlapping and redundant components, each with their own logic. This forms the "Leninist leash." People are connected to superiors through multiple channels. This can be direct, in the form of bureaucratic relationships that tie officials to both local party secretaries and national ministries. It can be coercive, in the form of subjugation to law enforcement or hired thugs. It can also be indirect, through social and economic relationships manipulated by state-owned enterprises and party front groups under the UFWD or neighborhood party committees. Organizing people in this way creates a complicated tangle of ties that sometimes conflict. This tangle of ties keeps the system in check while coming together at the top of the system to combine into something sturdy for the "Chairman of Everything" to pull on ([New York Times](#), November 8, 2015).

Once the Party has constructed these ties, it uses them to mobilize people. This occurs through instilling ideology by forcing officials to attend party schools and regular study sessions, and to stay abreast of circulars, speeches, party committee newspapers (the most famous of which is the Central Committee's *People's Daily*), and, more recently, mobile apps ([Pieke](#), 2009; [Foreign Policy](#), March 6, 2019). [2] Through this, cadres imbibe the correct words that will serve as a guide for action, orienting them toward the priorities of their various superiors. [3]

One consequence of this system is that it leads to a highly decentralized practice. Numerous demands for visible compliance with directives force subordinates to prioritize being seen to perform their roles by repeating and implementing the latest phrases. On the other hand, the overlap of interests and responsibilities means that actual implementation is a process of pretense and negotiation. [4] A clear illustration is provided by the contradictions in the PRC's high-speed railway system, which is at once an infrastructure marvel and white elephant—highly successful in places and vital for national priorities, but overleveraged elsewhere and exploited for local interests ([Ma](#), 2022).

### **Community of Common Destiny for Mankind**

For foreigners outside the direct reach of party discipline, the “organization” step relies on similar “weapons” but used in different proportions, while the “mobilization” step requires solutions other than the unvarnished ideology of Xi Jinping Thought. The result is the mature version of the CCDM framework unveiled at the Central Foreign Work Conference in December 2023, which is the model for all willing partners ([FMPRC](#), January 16, 2024; [China Brief](#), April 12, 2024). Instead of shoring up nationalist sentiment and Party loyalty, it appeals to a shared identity of development.

The formation of party-state ideology is an iterative and therefore protracted process. Since 2008, Beijing has offered to the world a supposedly superior and explicitly non-Western alternative to what it lambasts as “Western modernization” ([China Brief](#), May 10, 2024). A 2023 speech on Chinese modernization's role in national rejuvenation by Xi makes explicit that in an era in which “the East is rising, the West is declining; China is ordered, the West is in chaos (东升西降、中治西乱)” ([Qiushi](#), December 31, 2024).

The CCDM represents the distillation of this process, along with its (at least) three global initiatives. Like the strands of the domestic “Leninist leash,” these are overlapping proposals that each have their own logic. In the words of one Chinese scholar, the CCDM is not about replacing one system with another, but about “democratizing international relations and pushing the development of global governance in a more just and fair direction (推进国际关系民主化, 推动全球治理朝着更加公正合理的方向发展)” ([Aisixiang](#), December 31, 2024). [5] In other words, it aims to promote a larger role for developing countries and their values.

The Global Development Initiative (全球发展倡议) was launched in a 2021 speech to the UN General Assembly ([FMPRC](#), December 22, 2021). It is an ideological expansion of the One Belt One Road (一带一路) initiative in which Beijing uses material incentives and shared authoritarian interests to “organize” countries. One example, the Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative, has been used to

mobilize states to influence outcomes at the United Nations by inserting Beijing's preferred wording in important documents ([Lowy Institute](#), December 18, 2022).

The Global Security Initiative (全球安全倡议) was launched in 2022 at the Bo'ao Forum for Asia ([FMPRC](#), April 21, 2022). It promotes security cooperation by organizing states around the PRC and increasing their reliance on PRC security forces. It tries to mobilize Asian countries through alternative conceptions of security for the region that exclude the United States and offer regimes "internal security" ([Foreign Affairs](#), March 15, 2024). Its ideological component includes the "principle of indivisible security," which elsewhere has been used by Moscow to justify its invasion of Ukraine by casting aspersions on smaller states' seeking security from larger neighbors.

The Global Civilization Initiative (全球文明倡议) was launched in 2023 at the CCP in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting on modernization ([Xinhua](#), March 16, 2023). The CCP has long cultivated ties to foreign politicians through such exchanges and briefings—the organizing component of the "Leninist leash" ([Hackenesch and Bader](#), September 2020). This initiative offers an ideological umbrella in the form authoritarianism-friendly ideology against "Western" human rights universalism. States that choose to accept these terms in return help legitimize the CCP's system. The initiative has already achieved some success, with the Like-Minded Group at the United Nations pushing the definition of human rights away from political rights and toward development ([Siu Inboden](#), October 2021; [China Brief](#), February 2, 2024).

### **Thought in Practice**

There is strong global demand for "Chinese solutions" to local problems. Southeast Asian elites see great economic opportunities in the PRC despite political mistrust ([ISEAS](#), 2024). Among leaders from 129 low- and middle-income countries, 79 percent see the One Belt One Road initiative as supporting their countries' development ([AidData](#), March 2024). While some states are on guard against physical risks, they regard exchanging material benefits with the PRC in return for signing on to vague language as less consequential. Research shows that United Nations departments headed by officials from countries that go along with Beijing have more CCDM terminology in their documents ([Lam and Fung](#), 2024).

For Beijing, establishing "shared principles" at the outset of a relationship is very consequential, as they can then use verbal concessions to keep their counterpart's actions in line with their own preferences ([Solomon](#), 1983). Attention is often paid to the hard or sharp power aspects of the PRC's intimidation of foreign countries. However, while mobilization is often backed by threats in the final phase, persuasion and socialization are the main tools for prompting action.

Combining approaches—what Bethany Allen calls "dual-function strategy"—is a more nuanced and accurate understanding of Beijing's tactics. **[6]** For instance, One Belt One Road projects offer both development and dependence. PRC officials at the United Nations serve the organization as well as PRC interests. State-backed intellectuals interacting with other "civilizations" act as both genuine thinkers and conduits for influence operations.

Indonesia provides a good example of this approach. In its joint statement with the PRC following the third Belt and Road Forum in 2023, the country committed to supporting the PRC's national rejuvenation as both sides placed their challenges in light of "changes unseen in a century (百年未有之大变局)"—the formulation Beijing uses to signify the end of American hegemony ([FMPRC](#), October 18, 2023). Jakarta has since joined the BRICS grouping of countries, and is reaping the material rewards in the form of a Chinese-built high-speed rail, the first section of which is now operational ([CCTV](#), October 20, 2024).

As a large country in a key position, Jakarta's foreign policy of "bebas dan aktif" (independent and active) is unlikely to be heavily impacted. However, the limits to its ability to respond to Beijing's encroachments in the North Natuna Sea are telling ([ThinkChina](#), December 4, 2024). Its need to verbally comply with CCDM rhetoric may reduce its room for negotiation with the United States, while the infrastructure under the Global Development Initiative makes the region more economically dependent on the PRC just as ideology of the Global Civilization Initiative defuses domestic criticism of the PRC system.

The situation is even starker for smaller countries. The Solomon Islands and Kiribati have signed up for police cooperation, economic integration, and political education programs with the PRC. As a result, domestic freedoms and the scope for cooperation with traditional neighboring partners have been reduced ([ASPI Strategist](#), March 12, 2024). This also exposes the contradiction in the language of the CCDM. While the rhetoric promotes protecting sovereignty and unique development paths, smaller nations who sign up to this "community" instead see their sovereignty eroded.

The PRC is perhaps most successful when it can directly train cadres overseas. A leadership academy in Tanzania that opened in 2023 socializes regional leaders into the PRC's political system ([ACSS](#), November 7, 2023). This academy seeks to grow support for closing off the local political system to opposition, and is strengthened by the country's increasing economic dependency on the PRC ([WSJ](#), August 15, 2019). In this way, alignment with CCP preferences is locked in at several levels.

### **Conclusion**

Verbal compliance matters a great deal in a Leninist international system. Countries can prove compliance by repeating key phrases and acquiescing to Beijing's interests, akin to the way in which a party secretary within the PRC would navigate the domestic system.

The operation of this system is most apparent when a leader makes a misstep. The result is a concerted pressure campaign: the leader might suddenly find themselves sidelined among Global South partners in the United Nations system, attacked by domestic businesspeople, the target of online campaigns, or punished with retracted investments and informal trade sanctions. Any real support for an independent stance is made hard to gauge as other actors have been encouraged to deploy the "correct" language in public utterances. In this way, the CCDM enmeshes these countries into the stranglehold of the Leninist leash.

The emerging PRC alternative is a challenge to the "rules-based international order." It is one that appears to be gaining traction, especially in the Global South, where the United States is perceived as behaving in contravention of the values it espouses. However, unlike the rules-focused procedural systems of



international law, this alternative is likely more invasive for cooperating countries, because the “Leninist leash” is about developing ties with the express purpose of enabling any substantive actions the leader decides to pursue. In this way, joining the CCDM opens other countries up to Beijing’s Leninist system, for instance by exposing them to the “second China shock” of high-tech manufacturing imports, to agents of the PRC’s transnational repression, or to limiting trade with Taiwan. If such a system gains traction more widely, it could ultimately be much more destabilizing for the world.

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## Notes

[1] The Party’s current preferred rendering in English of “community of common destiny for mankind” is “community of a shared future for mankind.” This article uses the former, as it is closer to the original Chinese.

[2] For the important difference between the theory of Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao Zedong, see Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, 2nd ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p.30.

[3] For excellent field work on the way incentives of central industrial plans work in practice, see Lei Ya-wen, *The Gilded Cage: Technology, Development, and State Capitalism in China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

[4] For a series of relevant case studies on the interactions between different government levels, see Zhou Xueguang, *The Logic of Governance in China: An Organizational Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009159418>.

[5] The academic works at the Academy of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era at Renmin University in Beijing.

[6] Allen, Bethany. *Beijing Rules: How China weaponized its economy to confront the World*. HarperCollins, 2023.