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SCO Summit Focuses on Shaping Emerging Frontiers

By Arran Hope



Heads of state and government and their spouses at the at the Tianjin Meijiang International Convention and Exhibition Center for the 25th Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit. (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Executive Summary:

- The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an increasingly important vehicle through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to drive changes to the international system. This year's summit focused on seizing the current moment to shape rules and standards in emerging frontiers, such as artificial intelligence (AI), cyberspace, and outer space.
- CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping used the summit to unveil the Global Governance Initiative—the fourth such initiative he has announced in recent years. While currently short on substance, it is symbolic as a statement of intent for shaping an international order in the Party's own image.
- The SCO claims that it is not an anti-Western organization that seeks reform, not revision, of the international system. The Tianjin Declaration's explicit and implicit criticisms of the United States, as well as SCO member states' ongoing violations of international law in ways that undermine the current system, suggests that such claims are largely rhetorical.

“Profound changes in international relations have taken place.” “In a spirit of partnership, the Parties shall strive to promote the multipolarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order.” These are quotes not from last week, but from 1997. They can be found in the “Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order,” a foundational document of what later became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) ([UN Digital Library](#), May 20, 1997). In the nearly three decades since, the leadership in both countries has remained remarkably consistent on this assessment, and in their commitment to bringing this new order into existence. By the time presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping arrived in the Kazakhstan for last year’s SCO summit, they felt comfortable declaring that the multipolar world “has become a reality” ([Kremlin.ru](#), July 4, 2024).

The SCO, in Xi’s view, is an increasingly important vehicle through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to drive changes to the international system. It is, in the words of the 2024 Astana Declaration, “one of the key multilateral organizations in a multipolar world” (多极世界中重要的多边组织之一) ([SCO](#), July 4, 2024). Events in northern China over in recent days appear to provide further grist for these narratives, with a successful summit in Tianjin—including a visit, for the first time in seven years, by India’s prime minister Narendra Modi—culminating later in the week with a military parade to commemorate the Second World War ([China Brief](#), August 27). [1]

Concrete outcomes from the summit are difficult to assess, however, despite the triumphal pageantry. While Xi was keen to announce a tranche of smaller-scale goodies for the SCO’s ever-expanding membership, key details regarding the more significant agreements signed are yet to be disclosed. These include approval for an SCO development bank, finally greenlit after the PRC first proposed the idea over a decade ago, as well as an “SCO 10-Year (2026–2035) Development Strategy” (上合组织未来 10 年 (2026–2035 年) 发展战略) ([People’s Daily](#), September 2). An arguably more significant outcome was a symbolic one. Xi used the occasion to unveil a new foreign policy framework, the Global Governance Initiative (GGI; 全球治理倡议), which represents another milestone in the PRC’s attempts to exert normative influence over the international system ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[MFA\]](#), September 1). In addition, speeches and documents from the summit indicate an ambition to seize the current moment and shape rules and standards in emerging frontiers, such as artificial intelligence (AI), cyberspace, and outer space.

SCO Calls for Global Governance Reform, Targeting the United States

In a speech delivered at the 25th Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO, Xi talked up the original aims of the organization in enhancing security cooperation, announcing four new security centers while declaring that members’ extensive borders had been turned into a “bond of friendship, mutual trust, and cooperation” ([MFA](#); [Jiemian](#), September 1). This optimistic gloss was undermined, however, by the India-Pakistan border war in May, an exchange of fire between Tajik border guards and Taliban fighters near a Chinese gold mining operation in August, and unresolved tensions on the Sino-India border following a deadly clash in 2020—a reminder of persistent distrust among SCO member states ([The Times of Central Asia](#), September 2).

The SCO’s ambitions have expanded considerably over the course of its existence. The Tianjin Declaration (天津宣言) signed at this year’s summit was framed more broadly in terms of building a “more representative,

democratic, and just multipolar world” (更具代表性、更加民主公正的多极世界). Careful to avoid accusations that the co-signatories of the declaration reflect revisionist approaches to the international system, these ambitions are articulated as being centered on the United Nations, and specifically in the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. While the declaration assesses that the UN needs reform in order to adapt to “the needs of modern political and economic realities” (当今政治和经济现实需要), the GGI concept paper points out that this “does not mean to overturn the existing international order or to create another framework outside the current international system” (不是对现有国际秩序的推倒重来，也不是在现行国际体系之外的另起炉灶).

Despite SCO members often framing the organization as not anti-American or anti-Western, the declaration explicitly and implicitly singles out the United States (and Israel) for criticism. Its text “strongly condemns the military strikes by Israel and the United States against the Islamic Republic of Iran” (强烈谴责以色列和美国 ... 对伊朗发动的军事侵略), while disapproving references are made to countries making unilateral actions and pursuing destabilizing trade and economic policies. New initiatives, such as the SCO Development Bank, are also characterized as necessary to “further reduce dependence on other external financial institutions” (进一步降低对外部其他金融机构的依赖)—in other words, moving away from reliance of U.S.-led ones ([China Daily](#), September 3). Moreover, PRC scholars argue that the SCO might fill governance gaps created by U.S. retrenchment ([ChinaAffairs+](#), September 3).

Xi’s unveiling of the GGI comes as a response to this deficit in global governance; or, as Zhao Xiaozhuo (赵小卓) of the Academy of Military Science describes it, the “irreversible decline” of American hegemony ([ChinaAffairs+](#), September 4). The GGI concept paper articulates three examples of such deficiencies: serious underrepresentation of the Global South in international institutions, an erosion of authoritativeness (i.e. institutions are failing to enforce their rules), and an urgent need for greater effectiveness (multilateral plans and agreements are not being implemented properly). In response to these challenges, it proposes five core concepts (五个坚持) to underpin the reform of global governance. These all follow standard PRC normative pronouncements and include a commitment to sovereign equality, international rule of law, multilateralism, a people-centered approach, and achieving “real results” (力求实效). While this is not substantively groundbreaking, the GGI’s symbolism and the ambitions that lie behind it are representative of an emboldened PRC on the global stage.

PRC Seeks to Shape Rules in Emerging Frontiers

The output from this year’s summit indicates that the SCO might begin its attempts at global governance reform with a focus on influencing norms in emerging areas. This was most notable in the GGI Concept Paper proposed by the PRC, which described “areas with large governance deficits that urgently require attention” (治理紧迫性突出、治理赤字较大的领域). The priority areas listed include international financial institutions, AI, cyberspace, climate change, trade, and outer space.

This focus on alternative approaches to developing and regulating technology- and innovation-heavy domains is apparent in the Tianjin Declaration, which discusses improving coordination and cooperation on science and technology, enhancing future technologies programs and promoting innovation through an international AI

center. Other reporting discusses other initiatives in this area, including a China-SCO AI cooperation forum held in Tianjin earlier this year ([SCO](#), May 30; [China Diplomacy](#), September 3). The forum promoted products from leading PRC AI companies, suggesting that the PRC's primary aim through deepening technological ties with SCO member states is strategic, as much as it is economic or developmental. Rather than “global affairs being decided by all, the governance system built by all, and the fruits of governance shared by all” (全球事务由大家一起商量, 治理体系由大家一起建设, 治理成果由大家一起分享), as the GGI concept paper claims, alternative mechanisms like the SCO may function instead as channels for establishing the dominance of the PRC's technology stack throughout the global south (China Brief, [July 25](#), [August 7](#)). PRC scholars have pitched this as a reason for prospective members to join the organization, arguing that the SCO is adapting to emerging technologies, and that “participation may be selective, focusing more on economics, technology, and AI” ([ChinaAffairs+](#), September 3).

As a sign of the gap between rhetoric and reality, however, language about cyberspace and outer space across the declaration and concept paper highlights a hypocrisy at the heart of core tenets that the SCO claims to hold dear. As the declaration—and all previous SCO declarations—makes clear, member states are committed to “commonly recognized principles and norms of international law” (公认的国际法原则). These include respect for sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of states, equality, mutual benefit, non-interference in internal affairs, and non-use of force or threat of force. But the actions of member states, in particular those of Russia and the PRC, frequently violate those principles and norms. Putting aside the illegality of ongoing PRC actions in the South China Sea and in Taiwan's territorial waters, there is growing concern in the West over the aggressive actions of PRC state-sponsored cyber threat actors (China Brief, [December 20, 2024](#), [September 2](#)). One joint advisory authored or co-sealed in August by cybersecurity agencies from 13 different countries warns that these actors are “targeting networks globally, including, but not limited to, telecommunications, government, transportation, lodging, and military infrastructure networks” ([U.S. Department of Defense](#), September 4). Reporting from *The New York Times* quotes Western officials characterizing the attacks as “unrestrained” and “indiscriminate,” and clearly violating a number of the SCO's core principles ([NYT](#), September 4). The anti-satellite (ASAT) programs of both the PRC and Russia also appear to violate another commitment in the declaration to keep outer space free of weapons of any kind ([Secure World Foundation](#), June 12).

Conclusion

Already, the GGI is gaining traction, with officials from Russia, Belarus, Iran, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Malaysia, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all praising Xi's latest global initiative. In the months and years ahead, it likely will be incorporated into joint statements and used to promote CCP preferences in other multilateral fora. While fissures remain at the heart of the SCO, these have not been a barrier to its expansion over the last quarter century. As the PRC in particular seeks to use the organization as a vehicle for molding the international system in its image, it may well continue to grow in stature in the years to come.

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Rigging the Game: PRC Oil Structures Encroach on Taiwan's Pratas Island

By Andrew S. Erickson, Jason Wang, Pei-Jhen Wu, and Marvin Bernardo



CNOOC oil rig HYSY-981, which was stationed in Vietnam's claimed EEZ in 2014. (Source: [Global Times](#))

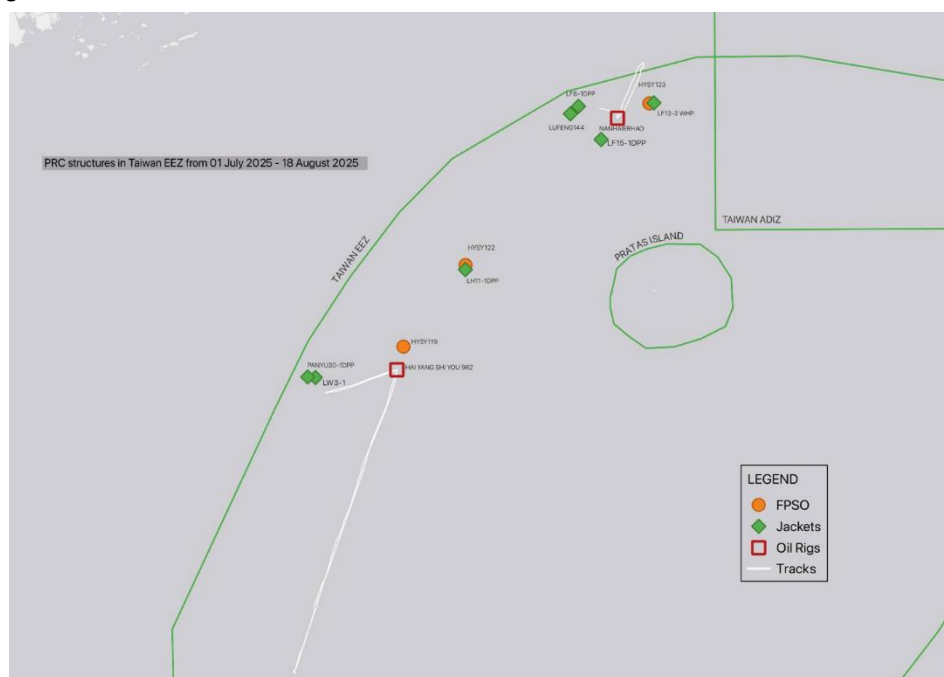
Executive Summary:

- Beijing's relentless pressure on Taiwan now includes oil rigs: twelve permanent or semi-permanent structures and dozens of associated ships. The structures, which are owned by state-owned firm CNOOC, include seven rig structures, three floating production storage and offloading (FPSO) vessels, and two semi-submersible oil platforms. All are located within Taiwan's claimed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near Pratas/Dongsha Island.
- Intruding rigs that exploit natural resources without permission typify maritime gray zone operations conducted by the People's Republic of China (PRC). They are designed to advance territorial claims, establish creeping jurisdictional presence in contested spaces, and shape the operational environment in Beijing's favor without open conflict—often under the guise of commercial activity.
- CNOOC's structures could facilitate a full range of coercion, blockade, bombardment, and/or invasion scenarios against Pratas or Taiwan more generally, particularly by enhancing end-to-end "kill chain" (C5ISR) capabilities if outfitted with sensors.
- Starting in July, CNOOC maneuvered the semi-submersible rig NanHaiErHao deep into Taiwan's claimed EEZ. It is now only around 30 miles from Pratas's restricted waters, although CNOOC rigs previously have come as close as 770 yards.
- By operating rigs in a neighbor's claimed EEZ, Beijing already has succeeded with Taiwan where it failed repeatedly with Vietnam. Persistent Vietnamese protest made the difference on those previous occasions. Failure to protest today risks normalizing sovereignty shaving and encourages further encroachment.
- Persistent cloud cover over the oil rigs' locations gives the PRC convenient means to hide their movements and activities. Furthermore, satellite operators typically do not collect imagery beyond the coast, and only countries with synthetic aperture radar (SAR) platforms at their disposal are able to conduct early-warning monitoring.

Oil rigs now constitute part of Beijing's multidimensional campaign to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty, which also includes cognitive, legal, and economic warfare. Taipei requires explicit permission to undertake "construction, use, modification, or dismantlement of artificial islands, installations, or structures" in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) or on its continental shelf ([U.S. State Department](#), November 15, 2005). By proceeding without permission, Beijing is rejecting Taiwan's jurisdiction. This newest line of effort involves 12 permanent or semi-permanent structures, as well as dozens of associated support ships. All were operating within Taiwan's EEZ near Pratas Island (a.k.a. Dongsha Islands; 東沙群島) between July 1 and August 18. Table 1 at the end of this article details these structures.

The 12 structures have been present since at least May 2020. They include—at a minimum—seven "jackets" (steel space-frame substructures of fixed offshore platforms that support the weight of an oil drilling rig), three floating production storage and offloading (FPSOs—converted oil tankers with an oil refinery built on top), and five semi-submersible oil rigs ([ScienceDirect](#), accessed August 18). [1] These are typically from Daya Bay Port east of Hong Kong in Guangdong Province. See the Appendix at the end of this article for an explanation of the fusion of remote sensing and AIS (automatic identification system) data used for the research underpinning these findings.

Figure 1: Location of Permanent Structures in Taiwan's Claimed EEZ Near Pratas Island



(Source: ingeniSPACE, Starboard Maritime Intelligence)

All the structures are owned and operated by China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC; 中国海洋石油总公司), a state-owned enterprise, and include some trailblazers. One fixed-jacket platform, CNOOC's innovative LF15-1DPP (Deepwater Production Platform; 海基一号/Haiji-1), is the first 330-yard deepwater jacket in Asia ([Xinhua](#), October 3, 2022; [CNOOC](#), November 4, 2024). Non-jacketed rigs include storied veteran NanHaiErHao (南海二号/Nanhai-2), the PRC's first semi-submersible drilling rig ([China Daily](#); [Sohu](#), May 28,

2019). Having first entered Taiwan's claimed EEZ on June 23, 2021, it has been operating in and out ever since. [2] NanHaiLiuHao (南海六号/Nanhai-6), another CNOOC rig, has been operating in and out of Taiwan's claimed EEZ since at least May 2020. On July 15, 2024, it came within 770 yards of Pratas's restricted waters. In addition, among the three FPSOs is the first cylindrical FPSO to be designed and manufactured in the PRC ([CGTN](#), August 18, 2023).

State-Owned Structures Have Dual-Use Potential

CNOOC is a national asset tasked with far more than commercial considerations (Murphy, 2013). [4] In 2012, then-CNOOC Chairman Wang Yilin (王宜林) declared that "[l]arge-scale deep-water rigs are our mobile national territory and a strategic weapon" ([Wall Street Journal](#), August 29, 2012; [OffshoreTech LLC](#), accessed August 18).

CNOOC's "jackets" are capable of hosting infrastructure to facilitate military operations against Pratas specifically, and Taiwan more generally. In fact, these latest structures may be more valuable for constraining Taiwan's space than for their nominal commercial purpose of extracting oil. Their construction is an easily affordable effort for Beijing—significantly cheaper than South China Sea feature augmentation yet providing similar self-perceived benefits in terms of jurisdictional assertion and dual-use optionality. J. Michael Dahm has documented the formidable array of sensors, communications systems, and weapons that the PRC has deployed on Spratly outposts ([Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory](#), 2020). [5] Many of these could be applied to oil installations.

Given their size and support from seabed-grounded jackets, the rigs could easily accommodate surface-search navigation radars and electro-optical, SIGINT, and acoustic sensors for detection, as well as small-caliber guns. The PRC has experimented with various structures and systems as part of state-owned defense electronics developer China Electronics Technology Group Corporation's (CETC; 中国电科) "Blue Ocean Information Network" (蓝海信息网络), integrating space, air, shore, sea, and submarine systems. These host, or serve as relays to, multifarious sensing platforms for X-band search radar, tropospheric scatter communication systems, and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) communications relays. Jacketed structures offer a fixed alternative for hosting CETC's "Comprehensive Information Floating Platform" (综合信息浮台). One variant of its "Ocean E-Station" (海洋E站), the "Anchored Floating Platform Information System" (锚泊浮台信息系统), is particularly suited for mid-sea and fixed sea areas (as opposed to CETC's island-based variant) ([Exovera](#), February 7).

The structures' helipads could support attack helicopters. Depending on their weight tolerance, they might support even larger kit, such as point-defense surface-to-air missiles and cruise-missile launchers. If developed as military facilities, lack of oil extraction equipment such as cranes and drill booms would leave more weight margin for armaments and fortification. In fact, if the jacket is modularized, the platform can easily be removed

Figure 2: LF15-1 DPP Jacket Design



(Source: [OffshoreTech LLC](#))

in its entirety and replaced with a dedicated militarized platform. Replacement is not a new concept. From 1967–88, Italy’s space program used three repurposed oil platforms off Kenya’s coast as a satellite launch-control-radar complex ([Agenzia Spaziale Italiana](#), accessed August 18).

Figure 3: Movement of NanHaiErHao Oil Rig From July 17–24, 2025



(Source: ingeniSPACE, Starboard Maritime Intelligence)

Patterns of Suppression

Dual-use encroachment on Pratas affords gradual benefits without the onus of overt kinetic action. The Pentagon’s latest *China Military Power Report* argues that the PRC “could launch an invasion of small Taiwan-occupied islands” such as Pratas “with few overt military preparations beyond routine training.” It notes that this would entail much less risk than an invasion of larger, better-defended islands such as Matsu or Kinmen, even though such an operation is within the capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (U.S. Department of Defense, [“Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,”](#) December 2024). Worryingly, China Maritime Studies Institute affiliate Julia Famularo assesses similarly that the PRC “is gradually exercising the skills necessary to seize one of Taiwan’s outlying islands and potentially seek to force Taiwan leaders to the negotiating table” (Famularo, July 2025). [6]

Beijing’s operations impinging on Pratas are the latest in a pattern of similar activities in other contested regional waters. In each of the three near seas, the PRC has employed rigs and other infrastructure to assert sovereignty claims, while allowing for additional capabilities. Since 2018, Beijing has emplaced at least 13 lighthouse-shaped, solar-powered buoys in the Yellow Sea, each up to 43 feet high and 33 feet wide ([KBS World](#), June 3;

[CSIS Beyond Parallel](#), June 23). In the Yellow Sea Provisional Measures Zone—where Seoul and Beijing’s EEZ claims overlap and where only fishing and navigation-related activities are permitted, per a 2000 agreement—the PRC has deployed a former oil rig managing two enormous aquaculture cages ([Sealight](#), April 17; [UN Food and Agriculture Organization](#), accessed August 18). It has blocked South Korean vessels from approaching the structures and declared temporary exclusion zones nearby, including in Seoul’s claimed EEZ. Former deputy registrar of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, Kim Doo-young, posits that the PRC could effectively deny over 4.6 square miles by installing 12 structures in a four-by-three grid (each 230 feet in diameter, spaced 0.6 miles apart). This would make it virtually impossible for Korean fishing or research vessels to enter the area. These structures have direct military implications, too. They parallel Pyeongtaek on the Korean peninsula, which could be targeted to attempt to impede U.S. forces based in Korea during a Taiwan contingency ([Korea JoongAng Daily](#), March 25).

The PRC’s most extensive deployments are in the East China Sea, where it has 20 fixed rigs in the disputed Shirakaba/Chunxiao gas fields, with two recently added and at least three mobile drilling rigs active and sometimes connecting ([CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative \[AMTI\]](#), August 1). On June 24, Japan’s foreign ministry protested that “China has been taking steps to install a new structure” there ([MOFA Japan](#), June 24; [Japan Times](#), June 25). Tokyo consistently opposes the rigs, charging that they could support radars and military aviation ([AMTI](#), August 5, 2015). In 2016, Japan’s defense ministry confirmed the installment of “an anti-surface vessel radar and a surveillance camera” on one of the platforms and reported its continued presence through 2023 (Japan Ministry of Defense, “Defense of Japan,” [2019](#), [2023](#)). [7] In July 2023, according to its 2025 defense white paper, the ministry confirmed the existence of a buoy believed to have been installed by the PRC within Japan’s EEZ. Japan lodged a protest with the PRC and strongly demanded its immediate removal. As of February 2025, the buoy was no longer present. A second buoy, discovered in December 2024 within Japan’s EEZ, was also gone as of May 2025 (Japan Ministry of Defense, “[Defense of Japan](#),” 2025; [Research Institute for Peace and Security](#), May 30). For Tokyo, persistent objection seems to have made things better than they otherwise would be.

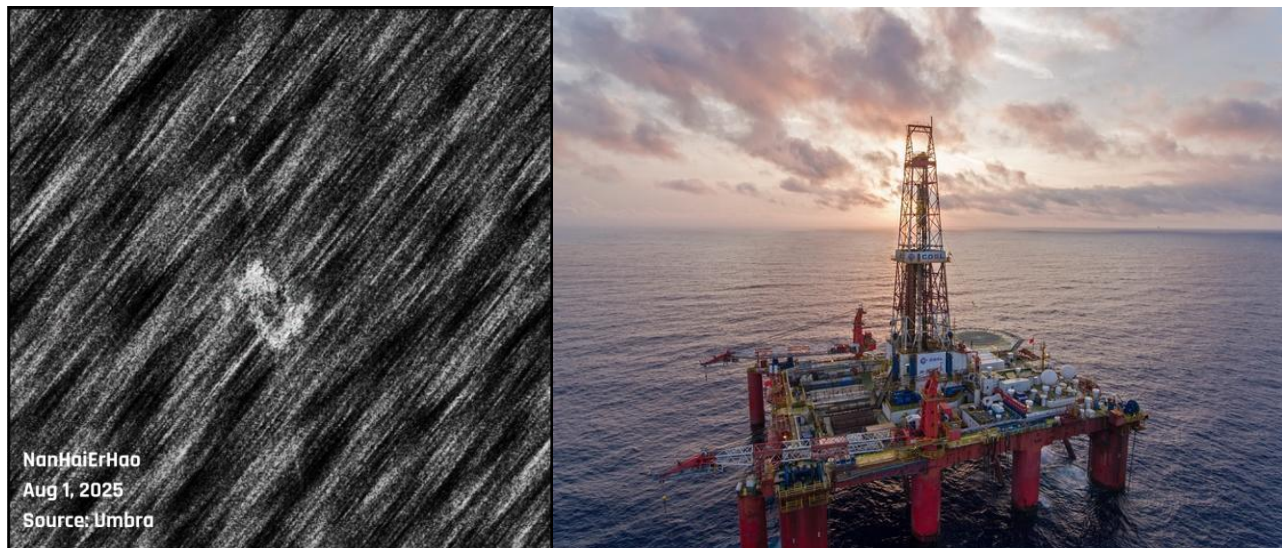
In the South China Sea, the PRC has deployed infrastructure assertively, to the point of generating crises with Vietnam. Hanoi has long been wise to Beijing’s game. In 1997 and 2004, Sinopec—a PRC “big three” national oil company together with CNOOC and PetroChina—deployed semi-submersible drilling rig Kantan-3 in Vietnam’s claimed EEZ. On both occasions, it withdrew the rig after Vietnamese protests ([The Strategist](#), May 15, 2014). In 2014, the PRC staged an elaborate effort to protect another semi-submersible oil rig stationed within Vietnam’s claimed EEZ; this time, the rig was owned by CNOOC. The operation could serve as a model for a future defense of similar structures in Taiwan’s claimed EEZ ([China Brief](#), June 19, 2014). Beijing’s actions operationalized and refined a layered multi-sea-force “cabbage strategy,” whereby Maritime Militia envelop a contested feature or structure, China Coast Guard vessels “protect” them, and PLA Navy warships maintain overwatch, ready to intervene. The PRC maintained a successful sea barrier against Vietnamese pressure for

Figure 4: LF15-1DPP Fixed Deepwater Jacket Platform Oil Rig Captured With SAR (Left) and Optical (Right)



(Source: Umbra [L]; [Dute News](#) [R])

Figure 5: NanHaiErHao Semi-Submersible Oil Rig Captured With SAR (Left) and Optical (Right)



(Source: Umbra [L]; [KK News](#) [R])

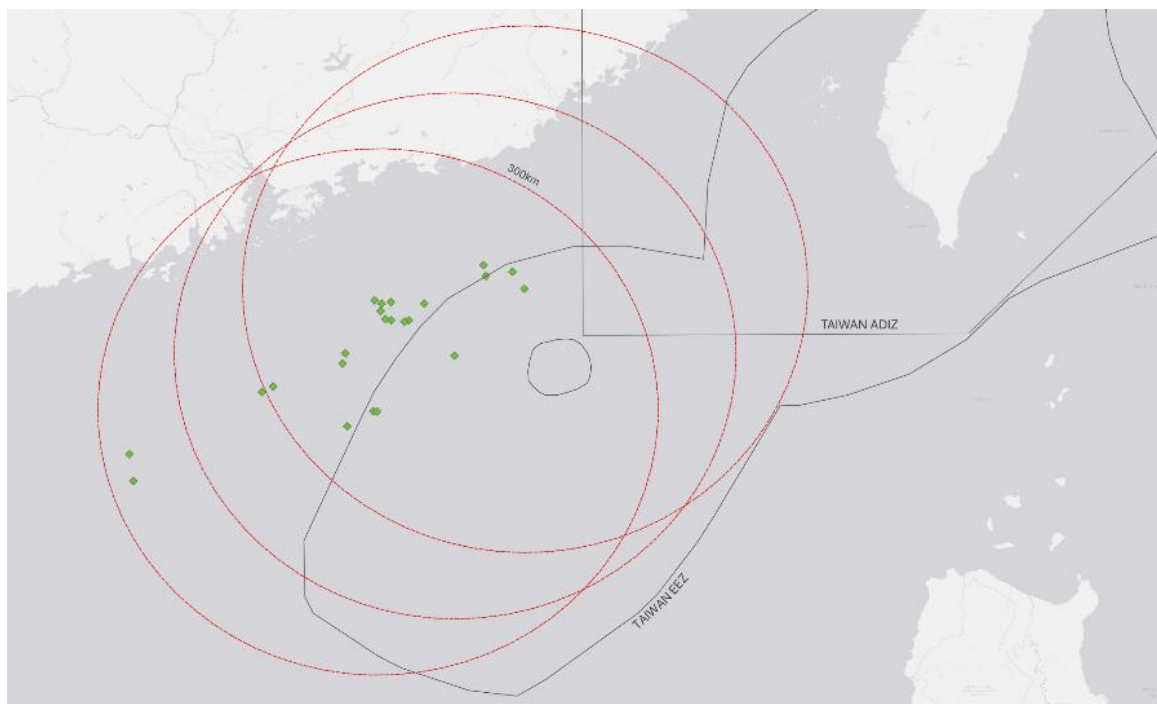
the removal of the rig (the HYSY-981) from disputed waters from May 2–July 15, 2014, keeping 110–15 vessels around the rig in a layered cordon extending out to 12 nautical miles (14 miles) and beyond ([Vietnamese Embassy to Germany](#), June 5, 2014; [CIMSEC](#), May 17, 2016; [AMTI](#), July 12, 2017). It deployed roughly twice the maritime presence of Vietnam, leaving the latter no way to penetrate the defensive rings enveloping the rig (without the use of deadly force, at least). Four PLA Navy warships participated, as did 35–40 coast guard, 40 militia, and roughly 30 oil company and other commercial vessels ([Andrew S. Erickson](#), February 7, 2017; [CIMSEC](#), January 23, 2019). The critical stakes for Hanoi's interests, coupled with Vietnam's inability to match the PRC at sea despite its every incentive to do so and closer proximity to ports and supply lines, demonstrated the PRC's qualitative and quantitative superiority over Vietnam's sea forces. HYSY-981 was nevertheless relocated ahead of schedule, apparently in response to Hanoi's sustained maritime resistance, Vietnamese public unrest, and government protest. Both aspects should resonate in Taipei, with the PRC now achieving against Taiwan what it was unable to achieve against Vietnam.

Potent Precedents, Potential, and Pushback

Historical examples of installing sensors and weapons on rig-type structures and using them to support military operations underscore possibilities for both perceived utility and costly escalation. During 1942–43, Britain deployed Maunsell sea forts. Navy variants, which helped destroy a German E-Boat in World War II, were designed to deter, detect, and deny German air raids in the Thames estuary. They had twin reinforced concrete legs with steel decks mounting two 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns, two Bofors anti-aircraft guns, and radar/operations spaces. Army variants for air defense, which were also present in the Thames Estuary as well as Liverpool Bay, comprised clusters of seven interlinked steel towers—four with 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns, one with Bofors 40mm guns, one searchlight tower, and a central control/accommodation tower. A current example of the military relevance rig-type structures offer is the U.S. SBX-1 missile-defense ship, based on a semi-submersible oil platform and dominated by an enormous active electronic scanned array (AESA) radar ([U.S. Navy](#), accessed August 18).

The 1981–88 Tanker War offers the most significant modern example of marine structures in kinetic warfare. Iran repurposed offshore oil/gas platforms as forward bases with radars, radios, and guns monitoring tanker routes and cueing Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) attacks from speedboats, minelayers, and helicopters staged there (David Crist, "[Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea](#)," July 1, 2009). More than one third of all Iranian attacks on shipping occurred within 50 nautical miles (58 miles) of three key platform clusters (Crist, [The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran](#), 2010, p.210). Under the 1st Naval District command in Bandar Abbas, these observation-communications-attack posts astride key sea lanes had surface-search radar and radios/teletypes tracking merchant traffic and relaying targeting data. Operating undercover as National Iranian Oil Company employees, four Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) observers manned each platform together with other personnel. Bandar Abbas relayed attack orders through the platforms' radio network. IRGCN vessels surged from the nearest platform along a target ship's anticipated course. Helicopters launched wire-guided anti-tank missiles.

Figure 6: Ranges for Hypothetical YJ-12 Anti-Ship Missile Batteries
Stationed on PRC Structures in Taiwan's Claimed EEZ



(Source: ingeniSPACE)

On September 21, 1987, U.S. forces caught IRIN LST *Iran Ajr* mining Bahrain's main channel. [8] The vessel had previously called on one of the platform clusters, although Tehran claimed it was routinely resupplying oil platforms ([Naval History and Heritage Command](#), April 18, 1988). In response to subsequent Iranian attacks on U.S. vessels, [9] the U.S. Navy executed two calibrated strikes rendering most platforms inoperable. One, Operation Nimble Archer (October 19, 1987), targeted a cluster of three platforms. A frigate issued an evacuation warning, then three destroyers fired five-inch guns. One structure succumbed to gas flames. SEALs boarded the unshelled northern platform, collected accumulated and incoming telex messages, and set destruction charges (Crist, *The Twilight War*, 2010, p. 310–12). The other strike, Operation Praying Mantis (April 18, 1988), was the largest U.S. naval surface action since World War II. It targeted two of the most important IRGCN staging platforms. One suffered a similar fate as the platforms targeted the previous year, while at the other a stray shell struck a gas-separation tank, incinerating the Iranian gun crew and precluding boarding (Crist, ["Gulf of Conflict"](#), 2010, p.7–8; Crist, *The Twilight War*, 2010, p. 335–342). After a ceasefire, Iran demolished the platforms that the U.S. military had destroyed.

Monitoring Challenges

The persistent clouds over Pratas and its surroundings give the PRC convenient means to hide their movements and activities. Whether using exquisite or commercial means, electro-optical imaging as a monitoring option is of limited use. Furthermore, satellite constellation operators normally do not collect imagery beyond the coast. Even the European Space Agency's Copernicus Program rarely covers so far out to sea. From an indications and warning perspective, the implication is that early-warning monitoring capabilities are

limited to countries with all-weather imaging—such as SAR—and specialized human resources at their disposal ([The Diplomat](#), August 16).

Conclusion

For now, CNOOC's twelve permanent or semi-permanent structures near Pratas Island, which include seven rig structures, three FPSOs, and two semi-submersible oil platforms, are an additional component of a comprehensive toolkit supporting Beijing's all-domain pressure campaign. This campaign seeks to expand control over the South China Sea via incremental extraterritorial gains, to strangle and absorb Taiwan, and to surveil and probe potential adversaries who might intervene. Structures such as these, primarily composed of jackets, are easily modified. They can be temporary or permanent, commercial or military. Too long overlooked, they offer ambiguous optionality for peacetime-coercive or wartime benefits, aligning with Beijing's preferred tactics. Monitoring these activities requires dedicated all-weather imaging resources to provide indications and warning.

CNOOC has imposed drilling rigs in Taiwan's claimed EEZ in a way that it failed to do in Vietnam's. Countering the PRC's employment of dual-use infrastructure to undermine sovereignty is both possible and essential. As Tokyo and Hanoi's experiences suggest, demonstrating cognizance of CNOOC's structures and judiciously opposing them will not end all pernicious efforts; Beijing probes relentlessly. However, it could slow or halt PRC progress and pushiness short of a dangerous tipping point. Silence and inaction, by contrast, risk encouraging further advances. In a positive example of successful pushback, Taiwan's Coast Guard routinely repels China Coast Guard vessels from Pratas restricted waters and expels or seizes intruding fishing boats ([FocusTaiwan](#), June 22). Transparent monitoring of encroaching PRC oil structures and vessels is now urgently needed to ensure full maritime domain awareness and avoid further faits accomplis.

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Notes

[1] Yong Bai and Wei-Liang Jin, *Marine Structural Design*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2016), 197–227.

[2] This oil rig appears on AIS (automatic identification system) as “NANHAIERHAO.” For readability, it is rendered “NanHaiErHao” throughout this article.

[3] The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) defines a flight information region as “an airspace of defined dimensions within which flight information service and alerting service are provided” ([Skybrary](#), accessed August 18).

[4] Martin Murphy, “Deepwater Oil Rigs as Strategic Weapons,” *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 2 (Spring 2013), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol66/iss2/9>.

[5] J. Michael Dahm, *South China Sea Military Capabilities Series: A Survey of Technologies and Capabilities on China’s Military Outposts in the South China Sea* (Laurel, MD: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020), <https://www.jhuapl.edu/work/publications/south-china-sea-military-capabilities-series>.

[6] Julia Famularo, “Great Inspectations: PRC Maritime Law Enforcement Operations in the Taiwan Strait,” *China Maritime Report* No. 48 (Newport, RI: Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, July 16, 2025), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/48/>.

[7] There is neither mention of the radar in the 2024 and 2025 editions nor information indicating its removal. The reason for the omission is unknown.

[8] LST stands for “landing ship, tank” and refers to ships that support amphibious operations by carrying tanks, vehicles, cargo, and landing troops directly onto a low-slope beach with no docks or piers.

[9] These attacks included the October 16, 1987 Silkworm strike on U.S.-flagged tanker *Sea Isle City* and April 14, 1988 mining of USS *Samuel B. Roberts*.

Table 1: PRC Structures in Taiwan's Claimed EEZ Observed Between July 1 and August 18, 2025

AIS Ship Name	MMSI	Type	Source
HYSY119	414030000	FPSO	Baird Maritime
HYSY122	414937000	FPSO	China Classification Society
HYSY123	414833000	FPSO	People.cn
HAI YANG SHI YOU982	413491550	Semisubmersible oil rig	HYSY982 Specifications
LF12-3 WHP	413514170	Jacket wellhead platform	LF12-3 Envt Assessment Report (pg. 15)
LF8-1DPP	413535880	Jacket drilling and production platform	LF Oil Fields Envt Assessment Report (pg. 26)
LF15-1DPP	413336860	Jacket drilling and production platform	LF Oil Fields Envt Assessment Report (pg. 23)
LUFENG144	413282540	Jacket drilling and production platform	LF Oil Fields Envt Assessment Report (pg. 36)
LH11-1DPP	413535880	Jacket drilling and production platform	LH11-1 Envt Assessment Report (p. 15)
LW3-1	412476980	Jacket central equipment platform	LW3-1 Envt Assessment Report (p. 1)
NANHAIERHAO	412461260	Semisubmersible oil rig	NanHaiErHao Specifications
PANYU30-1DPP	413230000	Jacket drilling and production platform	PY30-1 Envt Assessment Report (pg. 27)

Appendix: A Note on Methodology

The first comprehensive public findings on the PRC's rig structures near Pratas were derived via open-source means by ingeniSPACE, a geospatial-intelligence company that helps users acquire, task, fuse, and analyze remote-sensing data across multiple satellite constellations. IngeniSPACE used AIS data for ships known to operate for CNOOC across Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan's claimed EEZs. By examining sailing tracks and patterns-of-life for these support vessels, areas of interest were generated across the region where permanent structures and oil rigs were likely operating.

Specifically for the area around Taiwan-administered Pratas Island, analysts used pattern-of-life analysis to identify CNOOC jacket locations, active oil rigs, and oil and gas exploratory activities. Given the level of activity, it was ascertained that these oil rigs and associated vessels were manned and operational. IngeniSPACE then located public announcements concerning the rigs and support vessels and identified the companies involved. Houston-based OffshoreTech LLC apparently provided independent third-party verification of the jacket structural and load-bearing designs for a number of the fixed platforms within Taiwan's claimed EEZ ([OffshoreTech LLC](#), accessed August 18). This third-party verification uses in-place and pre-service analyses to verify that the jackets/structures have been installed securely (For instance, see [OffshoreTech LLC](#), January 30, 2021). Separately, a profit-sharing announcement was found on CNOOC's website referencing an arrangement between CNOOC (60.8 percent) and a South Korean company, SK earthon (39.2 percent), which also operates the LuFeng (LF) 12-3 Wellhead Platform (WHP) oil rig in the oil field known as LF 12-3 ([MEE](#), September 2020; [CNOOC](#), September 25, 2023).

Given persistent cloud cover at the area of interest, SAR was used to collect imagery instead of electro-optical means. Structures identified in SAR data were recognized as consistent with oil drilling platforms and FPSOs. IngeniSPACE's findings are depicted visually throughout this article; further details are available upon request.

PRC Conceptions of Comprehensive National Power: Part 1

By Erik R. Quam



A July 2025 press conference on completing the 14th Five-Year Plan headlined “My Country’s Comprehensive National Power Makes Rapid Progress Promoting Chinese Modernization in the 14th Five-Year Plan.” (Source: [CCTV](#))

Executive Summary:

- Comprehensive national power (CNP) is a central framework through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) measures its progress toward key strategic objectives. The ends the CCP is pursuing through building its CNP is a dominant position in a reshaped international order in which it has prevailed in an ideological competition with the West.
- The effort to establish a theoretical framework to understand CNP began in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping. Considerable attention and resources were devoted to developing CNP theory from 1990–2015, especially under leading scholars such as Huang Shuofeng and Wu Chunqiu. This work initially took place outside of government, at the National Defense University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, but today official measurements are likely conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics.
- Influenced by cybernetics and systems-of-systems engineering, PRC CNP theory frames CNP as a complex system with a large number of measurable indices. To this day, the Party-state appears to make precise calculations of CNP, including ranking the CNP of different countries.

Over two days in late August 2025, the National Committee of the 14th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference held a meeting to discuss the 15th Five-Year Plan that is currently under development. Politburo standing committee member and state vice premier Ding Xuexiang (丁薛祥) delivered a report to an audience that included a number of top-level officials. [1] Praising the country's development over the last four and a half years, he declared that the economic power, science and technology power, and comprehensive national power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) "have all leapt to a new stage" (跃上了新台阶) ([People's Daily](#), August 26).

"Comprehensive national power" (综合国力; CNP) [2] is a central framework through which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) measures its progress toward key strategic objectives. The framework also guides Beijing's approach to, and understanding of, competition with the West. The Party has assessed since at least 1992—when the term was first enshrined in the Party Charter—that CNP competition defines global systems competition, and that competition with the United States will determine the future of the international order ([Party Members Net](#), October 22, 2022). While some Western scholarship references CNP as an aspect of competition, or as part of Chinese-style modernization, very little has dealt with it as the primary subject of study. [3] This article is the first in a series of five that will analyze how the Party-state system has characterized the importance of CNP to both national rejuvenation and international competition, how the CCP has resourced national development strategies in pursuit of these objectives, and what the implications of this framing are for interpreting future CCP and PRC behavior. This first instalment provides an overview of what the Party means by CNP, the theoretical underpinnings that lie behind it, and a brief history of ongoing attempts by scholars and government agencies to calculate comparative CNP globally.

Beijing's Central Framework for Rejuvenation and Global Competition

Chinese scholars have defined CNP as the resources possessed by a state to ensure both its survival and its development; as well as the capability of that state to use its resources to achieve strategic objectives (Hu Angang, *China Study*, 2010). Jiang Zemin outlined this in 1993 when unveiling new strategic military guidelines, noting that "if we can sustain rapid economic development for a decade or several decades in a secure and stable environment, our economic, military, and comprehensive national power will increase greatly. Our security will be better assured, our international standing will be higher and firmer, and our cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics will have greater vitality" (只要我国能够在相对安全稳定的环境中加速发展十年，几十年，我们的经济实力，国防实力，在综合国力就会大大增强，我国的安全就更有保证，我国的国际地位就会更有巩固和提高，有中国特色社会主义事业就会更加充满升级和活动) (Jiang Zemin, *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*: Volume 1, 1993).

Since then, CNP competition has shaped the CCP's approach to modernization strategies domestically and international competition globally. As Jiang explained in 1991, international competition is, in the final analysis, "a competition of comprehensive national power" (综合国力的竞争) ([Selected Important Documents Since the 13th National Congress](#), May 23, 1991). [4] This assessment was repeated in a 1993 speech at an economic work symposium, where Jiang described competition among various countries as "a comprehensive national power competition based on economic, scientific, and technical strength" (以经济和科技实力为基础的综合国力的竞争) ([Qiushi](#), July 31, 2019). In 1992, Jiang's report to the 14th Party Congress argued

that the essence of socialism was in developing productive forces, something that can be assessed in terms of the extent to which it strengthens the socialist state's CNP (是否有利于增强社会主义国家的综合国力) ([CCP News](#), October 12, 1992). In the intervening decades, CCP assessments have displayed a remarkable consistency. Nearly 30 years later, Xi Jinping explained that “winning advantage in the competition for comprehensive national power is the key to national rejuvenation” (在综合国力的竞争中赢得先机是民族复兴的关键) ([People's Daily](#), September 27, 2021).

The end state the CCP is pursuing through building its CNP is a dominant position in a reshaped international order in which it has prevailed in an ideological competition with the West. For decades, the CCP has rejected the current international order as biased against the developing world, designed to protect Western hegemony over the international system and, ultimately, an existential threat to Marxist-Leninist regimes like the CCP. This is visible in the Party's long-held opposition to “hegemonism” (霸权) and “power politics” (强权)—rhetoric that took on new meaning at the end of the Cold War as a new, unipolar order began to emerge and the PRC's capacity to challenge it grew. According to many PRC analysts at the time, this unipolar order would inevitably evolve into a multipolar one, despite efforts by the United States to preserve its hegemonic status, a perspective that has since become a central theme of academic and Party literature on CNP. In this context, calls from PRC leaders for “multilateralism” and for a democratized international system are designed to challenge U.S. hegemony by using the United Nations to constrain U.S. options globally. This was most clearly articulated by then-Senior Colonel at National Defense University (NDU) Liu Mingfu (刘明福), who explained in 2009 that “building democratic nations is the weapon with which America attacks China, and building a democratic world is the weapon with which China attacks America” (Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream* [中国梦], 2015). [5]

Systems Theory and the Foundations of Chinese CNP Research

The effort to establish a theoretical framework to understand CNP began in earnest in the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping called for understanding the PRC's national power through comprehensive study. Responding to Deng's call, Huang Shuofeng (黄朔风), a scholar at NDU, published the first major study on the country's CNP in 1984, titled “Studying of the Chinese National Defense Strategy Systems for the Year 2000” (2000 年中国国防战略系统研究). Two years later, Wu Chunqiu (吴春秋), a scholar at the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), published an article in *National Defense University Journal* (国防大学学报) titled “National Defense Strategy and Comprehensive National Power” (国防战略与综合国力). The writings of these two early proponents of CNP research were part of a growing body of literature that emerged as teams at NDU and elsewhere conducted research on CNP, grand strategy, military-civil fusion, and cybernetics. [6] This work was unified by a desire to determine “scientific measures” (科学的对策) to ensure the survival and development of the PRC to “continuously enhance [its] comprehensive national power” (不断增强我国的综合国力) (Huang Shuofeng, *Comprehensive National Power Theory* [综合国力论], 1992).

The theoretical outline of how scholars have framed CNP relies on a systems-of-systems engineering approach. Wu explained in 1998 that the value of studying CNP lies “in its comprehensiveness, which requires considering the factors of national strength as a large system” (Wu Chunqiu, *Chinese Grand Strategy*, 1998). This focus reflects a preoccupation with cybernetics within Chinese academia over the past four decades. PRC

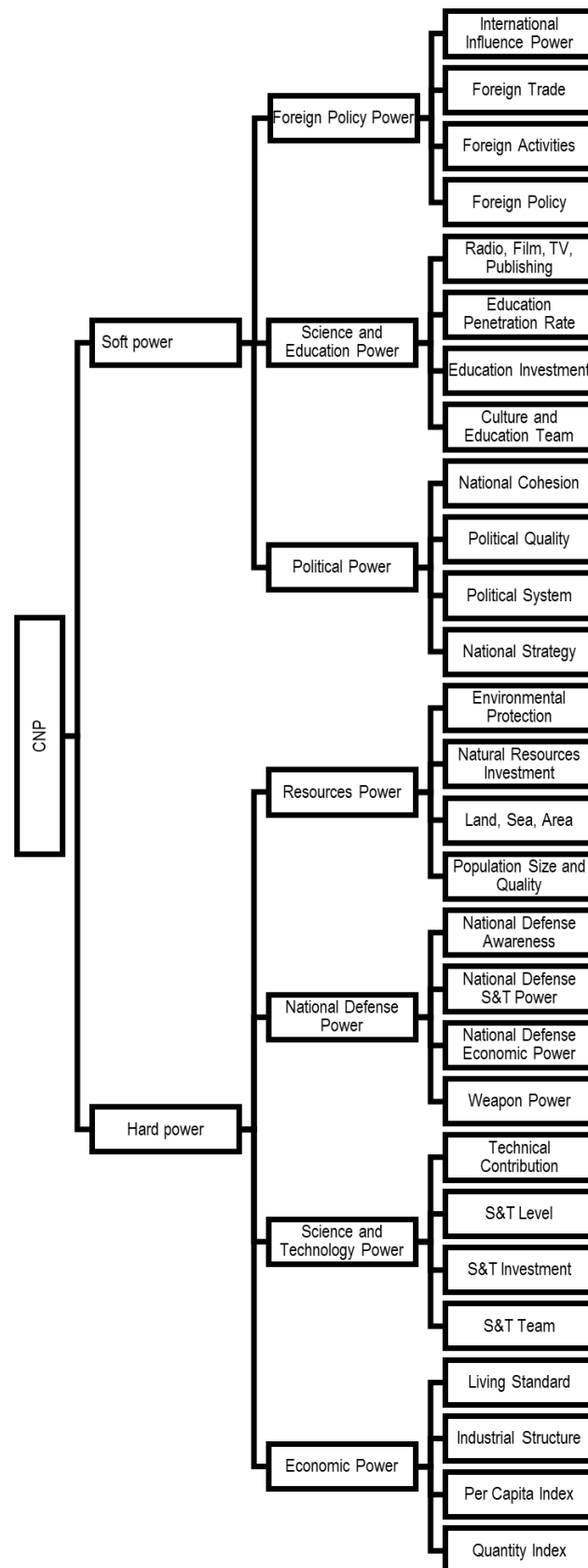
scholars view the overarching system as a “non-linear, dynamic, open, and complex system” (Huang Shuofeng, *Rivalries Between Major Powers*, 2006). According to Huang, “the non-linearity of the system means that inputs and outputs will be disproportionate, and small changes in the initial balance will cause huge changes in the results” (Huang Shuofeng, *Rivalries Between Major Powers: A Comparison of World Power’s Comprehensive National Power* [大国转量：世界主要国家综合国力国际比较], 2006). This makes CNP, in the words of one CASS researcher, “not a simple sum of multiple forces but system made up by a variety of forces ... and whether the structure is balanced is also extremely important” (综合国力不是多种力量的简单加总，而是多种力量有机组合的一个系统 ... 结构是否均衡也非常重要) ([World Economics and Politics](#), August 23, 2006). As such, it is impossible to fully and accurately reflect a country’s CNP by emphasizing any one factor in isolation.

Balancing this system-of-systems is the role of the state. As a former director of the Research Office of the CCP Central Committee explains in the introduction to Huang’s 2006 book *Rivalries Between Major Powers*, studying CNP enables the government to allocate resources across the national systems to drive development. This focus on maintaining an even balance across the system and on the importance of government coordination of development aligns with CCP assessments of the causes of the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, in Huang’s view, the collapse was a failure to coordinate relations between essential elements in the development of Soviet CNP: military competition led to an economic crisis, while scientific and technological innovation stalled and political turmoil ensued. This approach holds lessons for how scholars, and perhaps also the CCP, consider the ramifications of the PRC’s slowing economic growth. On the one hand, slowing growth could have disproportionate impact on the country’s CNP, given the “nonlinearity” of the system. Conversely, Huang’s work suggests that it would be an error to over-weight the importance of slowing economic growth on the country’s overall CNP.

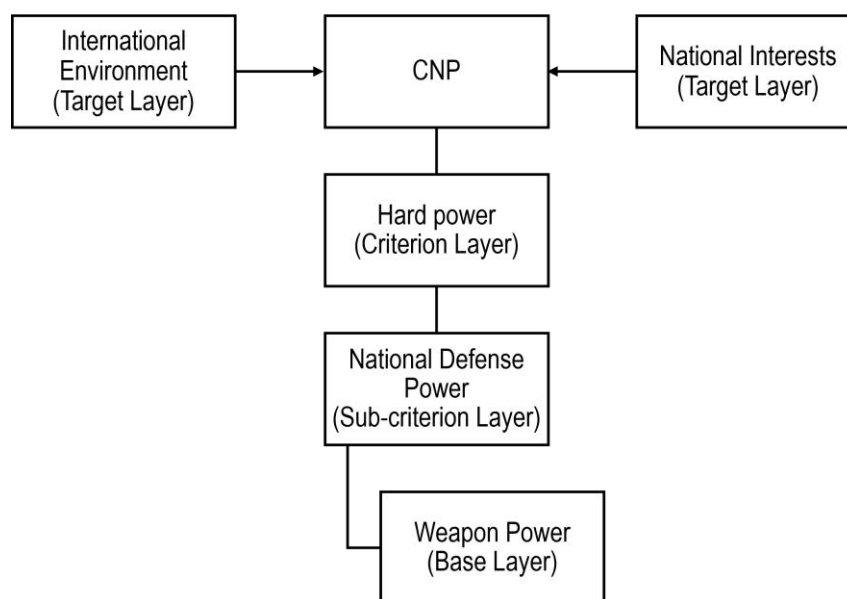
Different authors describe the particular subsystems that make up CNP in different ways. Despite not knowing with certainty precisely how the CCP measures CNP, consistency across a wide-body of sources offers valuable insights. Most include similar core elements. These elements also fit with a list of critical areas of focus for the Party that Jiang highlighted at the 14th Party Congress: economics, politics, science and technology, education, culture, military affairs, and foreign affairs ([CCP News](#), October 12, 1992).

Huang explains that in designing a CNP system, the first requirement is to develop the goal that the function of the system is designed to achieve, and to identify the criteria used to judge progress towards that goal. He breaks down this system-of-systems into a four-tier hierarchy. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2.) At the bottom is a base layer (基本层) of more than 30 variables. These all feed into seven critical elements of CNP in a “sub-criteria” (子准则层) layer. Four of these seven elements—economic strength, science and technology strength, national defense strength, and resource strength—support the hard power branch of a “criterion layer” (准则层), while a further three, political strength, cultural and education strength, and foreign policy strength, support a soft power branch. These two sources of power then feed into a “target/goal layer” (目标层)—CNP. Once this basic framework had been created, researchers could then start to apply metrics for calculating CNP.

Figure 1: CNP Indices in Huang Shuofeng's Rivalries Between Major Powers



(Source: Huang Shuofeng, *Rivalries Between Major Powers*, 2006, p.88)

Figure 2: Illustrative Excerpt From Huang Shuofeng's CNP Framework

(Source: Huang Shuofeng, *Rivalries Between Major Powers*, 2006, p.88)

Quantitative Methods Used to Calculate CNP

One of the most important aspects of Chinese approach to CNP is the understanding that it can be objectively measured and compared through mathematical equations and that resources can be adjusted to bolster it. The intent behind such calculations is to help CCP leaders understand the PRC's position vis-à-vis other international actors and identify elements within domestic modernization efforts that may need support or adjustment. Even if the specifics of the mathematical formulas the Chinese system uses remain elusive, assessments in key leadership speeches and reports of “leaps” and “taking big steps” in CNP has remained a consistent theme over the past 30 years. [7] For instance, Xi's declaration in 2017 that Socialism with Chinese Characteristics had entered a “new era” reflected assessments at the time that the PRC was making measurable progress in building its CNP.

Chinese scholars have worked for decades to formulate ways of calculating CNP. In *Comprehensive National Power Theory*, Huang explained the need to “use systems theory, synergy, and dynamic methods” (运用系统论, 协调学和动力学的原理) to establish a set of equations designed to measure CNP. In his 2006 book, he wrote that he had adopted a method that combined qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis, building on models developed by the engineer and cybernetics expert Qian Xuesen (钱学森) to create a model consisting of a main equation and 30 sub-equations, including more than 150 indices. Huang's equation is just one of many that emerged in the literature between 1992 and 2014. A decisive model does not appear to have been made public, though NDU, CASS, CICIR, and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) all have published global CNP rankings based on mathematical formulations. Tables 1a and 1b depict weighted values and rankings from the work of PRC scholars on CNP.

Table 1a: Weighted Values for CNP Indices

Natural Resources (0.08)	Economic Activity Capacity (0.28)	Overseas Economic Activity Capacity (0.13)	S&T Capabilities: (0.15)
Human Resources: 0.25 Land Resources: 0.25 Mining Resources: 0.25 Energy Resources: 0.25	Economic Strength (total): 0.70 Econ. Strength (per capita): 0.10 Productivity: 0.07 Material consumption level: 0.06 Structure: 0.07	Import/Export Trade Volume: 0.5 0 International Reserves: 0.5 0	R&D as a share of GDP: 0.30 S&T Talent: 0.30 Proportion of mechanical transportation in exports: 0.20 Share of technology- intensive products in exports: 0.20
Degree of Social Development: (0.10)	Military Capabilities: (0.10)	Government Regulatory Capabilities: (0.08)	Diplomacy (0.08)
Education Level: 0.20 Cultural Level: 0.20 Health Care Level: 0.20 Communication: 0.20 Urbanization: 0.20	Number of military personnel: 0.25 Military Spending: 0.25 Weapons Exports: 0.25 Nuclear Weapons: 0.25	Government Consumption as % of GDP: 0.20 Central Government expenditure as % of GDP: 0.20 Expert Questionnaire: 0.60	Diplomacy (Fuzzy evaluation results): 1.0

Table 1b: Country Rankings Based on CNP Indices

Country	1970	1980	1990
U.S.	83.6 Rank 1	78.4 Rank 1	79.1 Rank 1
Japan	39.6 Rank 9	48.8 Rank 4	52.9 Rank 3
Germany	45.6 Rank 3	50.0 Rank 3	50.3 Rank 4
France	37.6 Rank 6	44.9 Rank 5	43.8 Rank 5
China	27.5 Rank 10	30.2 Rank 10	32.3 Rank 9

(Source: Wang Tongfeng, Chen Sha, Shi Xiaoyu, eds., *Comparative Study of the Comprehensive National Power of Major Countries in the World* [世界主要国家综合国力比较研究], Institute of World Economics and Politics, China Academy of Social Sciences, Hunan, PRC: Hunan Publishing House, 1996, p. 169–71.)

Differences have persisted over how to calculate CNP. A 1996 book edited by CASS's Institute of World Economics and Politics explained that, while there is no singular definition of what constitutes CNP, there are consistent themes across all studies of CNP. The publication of its annual "Yellow Book" (黄皮书) indicated that CASS was working on calculating and comparing CNP globally. The Yellow Book series continues to address CNP to this day. [8] Nevertheless, the editor-in-chief of CASS's "Yellow Book" admitted in 2006 that disagreement led to them turning to an outside team for help with their calculations. (For a breakdown of different Chinese scholars' CNP comparisons, see Table 2 below.)

Table 2: Comparative CNP Rankings of Major Countries by Various Scholars

Scholar/ Institute	China's Ranking	America's Ranking	Japan's Ranking	Countries Compared	Ranking Year	Ranking Results
Wang Songfen	10	1	8	17	1970	1. The United States, 2. The Soviet Union, 3. Canada, 4. Australia, 5. Germany, 6. France, 7. England, 8. Japan, 9. Italy, 10. PRC, 11. Brazil, 12. Mexico, 13. India, 14. South Africa, 15. South Korea, 16. Egypt, 17. Indonesia
Wang Songfen	10	1	5	17	1980	1. The United States, 2. The Soviet Union, 3. Canada, 4. Germany, 5. Japan, 6. France, 7. Australia, 8. England, 9. Italy, 10. PRC, 11. Brazil, 12. South Korea, 13. Mexico, 14. South Africa, 15. India, 16. Indonesia, 17. Egypt
Wang Songfen	10	1	4	17	1990	1. The United States, 2. Russia, 3. Canada, 4. Japan, 5. Germany, 6. France, 7. Australia, 8. England, 9. Italy, 10. PRC, 11. South Korea, 12. Brazil, 13. Mexico, 14. India, 15. South Africa, 16. Indonesia, 17. Egypt
Huang Shuofeng	7	1	2	7	1998	1. The United States, 2. Japan, 3. Germany, 4. Russia, 5. France, 6. England, 7. PRC, 8. Canada, 9. Italy, 10. Australia, 11. Brazil, 12. India
CICIR	7	1	2	7	1998	1. The United States, 2. Japan, 3. France, 4. England, 5. Germany, 6. Russia, 7. PRC
CAS	8	1	2	13	1990	1. The United States, 2. Japan, 3. Germany, 4. Canada, 5. France, 6. UK, 7. Russia, 8. PRC, 9. Italy, 10. Australia, 11. India, 12. Brazil, 13. South Africa
CAS	7	1	2	13	1995	1. The United States, 2. Japan, 3. Germany, 4. Canada, 5. France, 6. UK, 7. PRC, 8. Russia, 9. Australia, 10. Italy, 11. India, 12. Brazil, 13. South Africa
CAS	7	1	2	13	2000	1. The United States, 2. Japan, 3. Canada, 4. Germany, 5. France, 6. UK, 7. PRC, 8. Russia, 9. Australia, 10. Italy, 11. India, 12. Brazil, 13. South Africa
Li Shenming and Wang Yizhou	6	1	7	10	2006	1. The United States, 2. England, 3. Russia, 4. France, 5. Germany, 6. PRC, 7. Japan, 8. Canada, 9. South Korea, 10. India
Li Shenming and Wang Yizhou	7	1	2	10	2010	1. The United States, 2. Japan, 3. Germany, 4. Canada, 5. France, 6. Russia, 7. PRC, 8. England, 9. India, 10. Italy

(Source: Qi Haixia, "From Comprehensive National Power to Soft Power: A Study of the Chinese Scholar's Perception of Power," How China Sees the World Working Paper Series, No.7 (2017), Griffith Asia Institute, Queensland, Australia; Institute of international Relations, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China, p. 4–5)

In 2013, the NBS undertook a project called “Research on the Comprehensive National Power Evaluation of Major Countries in the world” (世界主要国家综合国力评价研究), using a computational model that listed CNP elements similar to those previously outlined by Huang. The deputy director of the bureau at the time emphasized the importance of correctly understanding a country’s “comprehensive national strength” (综合实力) and its status and role in the international community ([NBS](#), November 17, 2014). He said that the PRC’s “status and influence in the international community are growing” (越来越高), and so the NBS should “objectively evaluate” its CNP. He directed his team to build the comprehensive national power calculation into a leading product of the statistical research department ([NBS](#), November 17, 2014). Subsequent NBS annual reports suggest that they have assumed responsibility for calculating comparative CNP ever since. A Xinhua article reviewing annual government statistical yearbook for 2018 framed the work under the headline “comprehensive national strength achieves historic leap” ([Xinhua](#), July 1, 2019). In January 2023, the NBS’s director explained that CNP had “reached a new level” (综合国力再上新台阶), citing per capita GDP growth in support of their claim to argue that the country’s “comprehensive national power, social productivity, international influence, and people’s living standards have further improved” ([NBS](#), January 17, 2023).

Despite these differences in examination of how to calculate CNP, including how measures are weighted, a clear picture of CCP priorities in pursuit of CNP has emerged over time, centered on the seven core elements that were originally laid out by Huang Shuofeng and Jiang Zemin.

Conclusion

Considerable attention and resources were devoted to developing CNP theory from 1990–2015. As subsequent articles in this series discuss, this theoretical framework has been influential in shaping Party ideology and government policy, including informing significant shifts in the Xi era. As early as 1996, scholars were noting that the study of CNP had “entered a stage of extensive practical application” (Wang Songfen, *Comparative Study of the Comprehensive National Power of Major Countries in the World*, 1996). Writing in 2015, Jinan University Professor Jia Haitao (贾海涛) explained that the concept and theory of CNP had become an important guiding ideology for socialist construction and national development in the new era, and that it had become the governing philosophy and theory of the Party and the country in the new era (Jia Haitao, *Comprehensive National Power and Cultural Soft Power Systems Research*, 2015). [9].

The relative decline in public discussions on how to calculate CNP after 2010 suggests that the system settled on a solution, but that solution was never made public. Continued reporting on the PRC’s expanding CNP by government agencies like the NBS and in statements by Xi Jinping indicate that work on CNP continues to this day.

The Party-state’s long-term and consistent framing of CNP has implications for interpreting future CCP behavior. CNP scholars such as Huang and Wu anticipated long ago that global competition in the 21st century would include “economic warfare, technological warfare, and military warfare” (Huang Shuofeng, *Comprehensive National Power Theory*, 1992). And in a 2002 work, Wu added that “victory without war does not mean that there is not any war at all. The wars one must fight are political war, economic war, and technological war ... a war of comprehensive national power” (Wu Chunqiu, *Dialectics and the Study of Grand Strategy*, 2002).

This article reflects the sole views of the author, and is not intended to be representative of the views of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, or the Department of the Navy.

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Notes

[1] The opening of the meeting was chaired by politburo standing committee member and CPPCC Chairman Wang Huning (王沪宁), and among 20 other listed senior officials were current and former politburo members Shi Taifeng (石泰峰) and Hu Chunhua (胡春华).

[2] This paper translates “综合国力” as “comprehensive national power.” Some official English translations use “comprehensive national strength,” though to avoid confusion this article translates “实力” as “strength.” (“实力” is used to discuss the elements that constitute CNP, such as economic strength (经济实力)). At times, inconsistent language is used to discuss CNP within the Chinese language discussion. Most Party documents use “综合国力.” Some scholars instead use the term “comprehensive national strength” (综合实力); though, in almost all cases, those who are writing about CNP as the main topic use “综合国力.” Conceptually, the two appear to mean the same thing.

Official English translations have translated “综合国力” in several ways over the years. These include: “overall strength” in the 14th and 19th Party Congress reports; “overall national strength” in the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th Party Congress reports; and “composite national strength” in the 20th Party Congress Report. “Composite national strength” is also used to translate “综合国力” in the 2021 Party Resolution on History. At times, however, even official translations use different terminology within the same document. For example, the 14th Party Congress Report issued by Jiang Zemin in 1992 translated “综合国力” as “overall strength of the country,” “overall capacity of the country,” and “overall national strength.” It is easy in reading only the English translations to not recognize that these three translations are all of the same term. Of course, terms can translate differently upon different uses as well, though that does not seem the case in the 14th Party Congress Report.

[3] One exception is an insightful 2000 study by Michael Pillsbury. Which laid a strong foundational framing of the discussion of CNP in the 1990s (Pillsbury, Michael, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, National Defense University Press, 2000). This paper seeks to not only step off from that strong framework but to develop how the PRC has resourced the pursuit of, and focus on, CNP over the ensuing 25 years.

[4] This came in a speech delivered at the Fourth National Congress of the China Association for Science and Technology (CAST) in 1991.

[5] Liu, Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era*, CN Times Books, Inc., New York, NY, 2015, p. 80–81. (The original Chinese version was published in 2009.) Liu, and this book in particular, are somewhat controversial, with many arguing that Western academics and scholars give Liu more credit than he deserves for influence within the Chinese system. However, it does seem consistent with two continuing lines of attack the PRC government uses in the information space against the United States. The first is the “weaponization” of democracy, which is clearly articulated across government documents. For example, see the 2021 and 2022 Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports titled “The State of Democracy in the United States,” which criticizes the U.S. system, and in particular U.S. democracy. The 2021 report, for example, warned “Any attempt to push for a single or absolute model of democracy, use democracy as an instrument or a weapon in international relations, or advocate bloc politics and bloc confrontation will be a breach of the spirit of solidarity and cooperation which is critical in troubled times.” The foreign minister’s statement, meanwhile, said that democracy “has become a ‘weapon of mass destruction’ used by the United States to interfere in other countries’ affairs” (MFA, [December 7, 2021](#), [December 11, 2021](#)). The second line of argument advanced by the PRC government that is consistent with Liu’s framing is the notion of a “democratic international order” that it has pressed for over the past several decades ([MFA](#), June 19, 2022; [Xinhua](#), April 25, 2023).

[6] The following is a list of key individuals and organizations involved in CNP-related research since the 1980s:

- Huang Shuofeng, who led a team at NDU from the 1980s until his death in 2006. That work produced at least three books examining CNP.
- Wu Chunqiu, at AMS, published a book in 1998 on Chinese grand strategy that examined CNP and systems analysis in great detail. Wu remains actively engaged on these issues today.
- Jiang Luming (姜鲁鸣), also at NDU, continues to shape the discussion on CNP through his work developing the Military-Civil Fusion Development Strategy, one of seven CCP national development strategies underpinning Chinese pursuit of CNP.
- Hu Angang, who served as chief editor of *China Study* (国情报告), an annual journal published by Tsinghua University that tracked and measured CNP from 1991–2012, when its publication appears to have stopped.
- Men Honghua (们红花), President of the Institute for China and the World at Tongji University and formerly of the Center for China Studies at Tsinghua University.
- Yan Xuetong (阎学通), a prominent Chinese scholar at Tsinghua University and Dean of the Institute of International Relations.
- Teams at CASS, CICIR, and other places across the Chinese system have devoted significant efforts to building CCP understanding of CNP.
- The National Bureau of Statistics and the National Development and Reform Commission, among others, also have devoted significant time to measuring CNP.

[7] For example, in 2002, Jiang Zemin called for ensuring CNP “reached a new level” (再上一个大台阶). In the 18th Party Congress Report, Hu Jintao reported that CNP had “stepped up to a new level” (迈上一个大台阶).

[8] At some point the focus on CNP shifted away from the “World Economic Yellow Book” (世界经济黄皮书) to the “Yellow Book of International Politics: Annual Report on International Politics and Security” (国际形势黄皮书: 全球政治与安全报告).

[9] Jia Haitao, *Comprehensive National Power and Cultural Soft Power Systems Research*, Beijing, China: China Academy of Social Sciences Publishing House, 2015, p. 33.

[10] A Chinese scholar explained this to the author on the margins of a Track 1.5 dialogue in Tokyo in May 2024. Off the record and under Chatham House rules, the scholar's name is not cited here, but is available upon request.

Appendix: A Note on Methodology

The theory and methodology of this series of articles is based on an assumption that comprehensively analyzing three key bodies of literature produced in the PRC over the past 40 years sheds light on the theoretical, ideological, and policy intent of the Party's approach to strategic competition with the West.

The first is a deep body of literature by traditional academics and researchers at Chinese universities, PRC academic institutions with direct government affiliation at places like National Defense University in Beijing, and pseudo-government academics at think tanks like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) or the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), both of which are directly affiliated with the PRC government. In particular, this study focuses on the work produced by such researchers over nearly four decades in the fields of CNP, grand strategy, great power relations, and Chinese development strategies, among others. These authors, and their work, scoped understanding of CNP and international competition across Chinese academia, the PRC government and the CCP, developing the theoretical framework for CNP and international competition. Much of this research and writing was done at the behest of the PRC government and the CCP, largely funded by government programs. Their work does not represent official government positions, necessarily, but much of it was done at the behest of state and Party organs.

The second body of literature consists of key CCP and PRC government documents produced from 1978 to the present. This includes speeches by senior CCP officials, Party Congress reports, government work reports, Five Year Plans, the evolution of the CCP Party Charter, national development strategies, Party guidance, and “outline” (纲要) and “decision” (决定) documents, among others. The Party documents serve as the cornerstone to understanding the CCP's ideological framing of strategic competition, including strategies and implementation instructions disseminated to the Party's 100 million members around the world. They serve as a blueprint of CCP intent. While these documents outline CCP ideology and strategic intent, they do not reflect pursuit of that intent. For that reason, the third body of literature critical to this series includes policy and strategy implementation documents developed by the PRC and CCP since the early 1990s, which shed light on resources being devoted to the pursuit of outlined intent, and offer measurable data to gauge success in pursuit of outlined strategies.

Criminal Organizations as Vectors of Influence in Taiwan

By Martin Purbrick



A PRC flag displayed prominently at the CUPP offices (Source: [YouTube/民視讚夯 Formosa TV Thumbs Up](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...), August 25).

Executive Summary:

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increasingly co-opted Taiwanese organized crime groups—most notably the Bamboo Union—for its united front efforts, using them to promote unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and undermine Taiwan's democratic institutions.
- Through figures like Chang An-lo and affiliated groups such as the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP), criminal networks are being leveraged for political influence, intelligence gathering, and psychological operations, often with tacit support or direction from PRC intelligence and propaganda arms.
- In response, Taiwanese authorities have intensified crackdowns on gang activity and pro-PRC influence networks, including efforts to dissolve CUPP and prosecute members linked to espionage, demonstrating a growing recognition of the hybrid threat posed by criminal-political collaboration.

In late August 2025, YouTube-based Taiwanese TV channel Formosa TV Thumbs Up (民視讚夯) posted a segment on “fifth column” activities in Taiwan. The program interviewed a range of experts, as well as Chang An-lo (張安樂), a man also known as “White Wolf” (白狼). Chang is a long-time member of the Bamboo Union (竹聯幫), a prominent Taiwan-based criminal organization. He is also the founder of the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (中華統一促進黨, CUPP), a Chinese nationalist political party with little public support but a claimed membership of around 30,000 people. The CUPP openly advocates peaceful reunification with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) under the “one country, two systems” (一國兩制) framework ([Facebook/CUPP](#), accessed June 7). In the interview, Chang denied he was part of any “fifth column” but, sitting in his office in front of the flag of the PRC, he argued in favor of “embracing” (擁抱) the PRC, saying that he wanted to “act as a bridge for cross-strait peace” (做兩岸和平的橋梁) ([YouTube/民視讚夯 Formosa TV Thumbs Up](#), August 25).

For years, the CCP has incorporated Taiwan’s triads—Chinese secret societies that have evolved into resilient criminal enterprises—into its united front work, using them to mobilize grassroots support for unification. This complements broader efforts, including cultural outreach through social media influencers, intelligence-driven infiltration of Taiwan’s military, and leaning on Hongmen (洪門) (mutual aid associations from which triads historically emerged) to disseminate patriotic messaging aligned with CCP priorities (China Brief, [January 13](#), [May 9](#), [June 7](#)). Together, these activities aim to manufacture the appearance of widespread societal support within Taiwan for unification with the PRC. Although little research currently traces the links between the united front system and organizations such as the Bamboo Union, its role and influence in Taiwanese domestic politics makes it worthy of study to better understand the ties it has with the CCP.

Bamboo Union’s Connections to Taiwanese Politics

Allegations that link PRC united front organizations and Taiwanese criminal gangs have persisted for years. In 2017, former Taiwanese President Lee Teng Hui (李登輝) warned that the PRC had expanded its united front tactics by recruiting pro-unification supporters and sponsoring organized crime in Taiwan to stir ethnic tensions and destabilize society ([Taipei Times](#), October 5, 2017). More recently, Taiwanese triads have sought to undermine President Lai Ching-te (賴清德) and apply internal pressure on his administration in pursuit of a pro-unification agenda. Lai has publicly noted these efforts, citing recruitment from gangs in a list of CCP’s efforts “to divide, destroy, and subvert us from within” during a national security address in March ([Office of the President of the Republic of China, Taiwan](#), March 13).

The Bamboo Union gang (竹聯幫), also referred to as the United Bamboo or *Chuk Luen Bong*, is perhaps the best example of a Taiwanese criminal gang that Beijing has coopted as part of the united front system. [1] Established in Taiwan in 1957, it was initially comprised of the children of Mainland Chinese refugees fleeing the communist takeover in 1949 ([Taiwan Cultural Memory Bank](#), accessed September 4).

The organization has long maintained close connections to those in positions of political power. Its most notorious instance of collusion came in 1984, when the head of the Ministry of National Defense’s Intelligence Bureau, Vice Admiral Wang Hsi-ling (汪希苓), reportedly met with Bamboo Union leaders in Taipei, allegedly

instructing them to assassinate a naturalized U.S. citizen named Henry Liu for criticizing the Kuomintang regime. The operation was carried out in California later that year ([Taipei Times](#), February 22, 2021).

In the decades since, the Bamboo Union has developed relationships with other organized crime groups, including the Wah Ching (華青) in the United States, Yakuza groups in Japan, and several triad societies in Hong Kong. Today, it maintains a broad presence across Taiwan, with an estimated membership of at least 10,000 and an extensive criminal portfolio. In August 2025, Taipei prosecutors indicted 18 members of a criminal ring affiliated with the Bamboo Union for alleged financial fraud and cryptocurrency schemes affecting more than 200 people. According to the indictment, the scheme allegedly had made illegal profits of more than NTD 770 million (\$25 million) in fraud schemes since May 2024 ([Taipei Times](#), August 21).

The Bamboo Union's ties to Taiwanese lawmakers today appear to remain strong. After the organization's former leader Huang Shaocen (黃少岑) passed away in February 2025, a large funeral was organized. According to local reporting, the funeral committee comprised "well-known Taiwanese in politics, economics, and business" (都是國內知名政經、商界人士), including former Legislative Yuan President Wang Jin-pyng (長王金平) and the Democratic Progressive Party's current minority leader Ker Chien-ming (柯建銘), among others ([LTN](#), February 17). These connections were highlighted the following month, when the Bamboo Union attempted to meet at a restaurant within the Legislative Yuan complex in order to select a new leader. The Taipei police responded swiftly, with authorities arresting over 40 suspects from three factions of the gang, and on March 27, Premier Cho Jung-tai (卓榮泰) condemned the gang's "inappropriate, public actions of domestic gangs," and directed the National Police Agency to closely monitor the situation and take appropriate action against any illegality ([Focus Taiwan](#), March 27; [Yahoo/Taiwan News](#), March 28). One of the contender to succeed Huang as leader, Liu Zhennan (劉振南), is also well-connected, having been hired as deputy head of an advisory group (顧問團副團長 for Hou You-ih's (侯友宜) successful mayoral campaign for New Taipei City ([Liberty Times](#), October 4, 2018; [Yahoo/Sanlih News](#), February 4). (Hou was also the KMT's presidential nominee in 2024.) [2]

Chang An-lo Ties Bamboo Union and CUPP to the CCP

The restaurant booking for Bamboo Union members was made by Chang An-lo, indicating his continued role as a power broker within both the gang and perhaps even political circles. Chang's long history and ties to elites in both the PRC and Taiwan has made him an ideal vector of influence for the CCP. Allegedly involved in the Henry Liu assassination, he was convicted in 1985 of drug smuggling and served ten years in prison in the United States. After returning to Taiwan, he was forced in 1996 to flee after being placed on the authorities' wanted list. Chang spent the next 17 years in Shenzhen, returning to Taiwan again in 2013 ([The Sydney Morning Herald](#), July 12, 2014).

During his time in the PRC, Chang cultivated powerful friends. Writing in the Washington Post in 2000, John Pomfret described a dinner Chang hosted with Hu Shiying (胡石英), the son of Hu Qiaomu (胡乔木), the Party's former propaganda chief and himself the son of the former dean of the Party School. Hu referred to his host as "Big Brother Chang" ([The China Project/Washington Post](#), August 16, 2018). Hu Shiying is described in reporting over a decade later by John Garnaut as an old associate of Xi Jinping, who also had close ties with

former KMT president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九). In an interview with Garnaut, Chang claimed to have met other princelings, including sons of a former CCP general secretary and a top revolutionary general. He also discussed his friendships with officials in the Taiwan Affairs Office. Garnaut also notes that the PRC's Ministry of State Security (MSS) had used the Bamboo Union to channel lucrative opportunities to select leaders of the DPP ([The Sydney Morning Herald](#), July 11, 2014). In 2017, however, the Taiwanese minister of the interior Yeh Jiunn-rong (葉俊榮) stated that such manipulation would not be tolerated following intelligence reports that aligned with Chang's account, finding that the Xiamen branch of the Taiwan Affairs Office was engaging with Taiwanese organized crime groups ([Taipei Times](#), September 30, 2017).

Chang's acceptance among CCP elites is likely related to his espousal of the Party's views on the political status of Taiwan, which have also been reflected in the stance of prominent Bamboo Union members for decades. A Phoenix TV (鳳凰衛視) report from May 2011 that interviewed Chang recalls a former Bamboo Union leader (and a lifelong friend of Chang's) saying in 1981 that he would "rather the CCP rule Taiwan than have Taiwan taken away by Taiwan independents" (我寧願共產黨統治，也不要台灣被台獨拿走) ([YouTube/huxudaji](#), September 1, 2011). Chang himself has actively promoted unification for at least 20 years. In September 2005, he created a civil organization in Guangzhou called the "Defending China Alliance" (保衛中華大同盟). This organization later moved to Taipei, rebranding as the CUPP—Taiwan's first party to openly support unification under the "one country, two systems" framework. As Chang has discussed in interviews, part of his goal in returning to Taiwan was to "cultivate red voters" (培養紅色選民) who describe themselves as Chinese ([Liberty Times](#), April 2, 2014; [RFA](#), February 2, 2021). Chang's activism has included disrupting protests—sometimes violently—as well as engaging in protests of his own, such as during U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in 2021 ([163](#), August 28).

CUPP may present itself as a political party, but its personnel has overlapped substantially with the Bamboo Union. Beyond Chang himself, prominent Bamboo Union figure Li Tsung-kuei (李宗奎) is a former CUPP vice chairman who has been active on pro-unification issues, though he now claims to be apolitical ([163](#), February 5; [Mirror Media](#), March 25). Earlier this year, reporting noted that Li had helped Terry Gou (郭台銘) collect signatures for his failed presidential campaign, for which he was given a suspended sentence and a substantial fine ([Yahoo News](#); [UDN](#), April 28). Li is also closely associated with Hongmen organizations, which are also vectors for CCP influence in Taiwan and elsewhere ([China Brief](#), June 7).

Taiwan Responds With Crackdown on Organized Crime and Influence Activities

In recent years, authorities in Taiwan have tried increasingly to crack down on criminal and subversive activities, including by targeting the Bamboo Union and CUPP. In November 2024, the Ministry of Justice announced that police suspected 134 CUPP members of involvement in illegal activities, including obstruction of justice, human trafficking, and homicide. That same month, prosecutors charged two CUPP members with receiving New Taiwan Dollar (NTD) 74 million (\$2.3 million) from the CCP to make propaganda promoting Beijing's political agenda and to influence elections in Taiwan ([Taipei Times](#), November 6, 2024). In March, following the attempting meeting in the Legislative Yuan, the Taipei Police issued a statement explaining that the National Police Agency had instructed units to investigate and prosecute Bamboo Union and other gang members who using criminal organizations as a front for political parties ([Yahoo/Taiwan News](#), March 28).

In response to ongoing pro-PRC political influence campaigns, Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior moved in January this year to dissolve the CUPP, submitting the case to the Constitutional Court of the Judicial Yuan for a final decision. The Ministry reported that the CUPP has long engaged in systematic and organized crimes, with core members alleged to have repeatedly violated multiple laws ([Ministry of the Interior](#), January 2; [Taipei Times](#), January 4).

Authorities also have identified clear links between the CUPP and MSS officers. In March, the Kaohsiung branch of Taiwan's High Court sentenced three CUPP-affiliated men for violating the National Security Act. CUPP deputy secretary-general Wen Lung (溫瓏), along with retired military officers Chiang Chiung-lin (江瓊麟) and Chu Hsin-yu (朱新瑜) were convicted of recruiting Taiwanese military personnel to agents of the PRC. Wen Lung, who started a business in the PRC in 2016, was recruited by PRC intelligence officers and later enlisted Chiang, a former Taiwanese air force officer, and Chu, a former Taiwanese naval officer, to join the CUPP and assist future recruitment. The covert operation was uncovered in 2019 when Chiang attempted to recruit a Taiwanese air force officer with offers of professional advancement and financial rewards. The officer reported the approach, leading to an investigation. All three individuals admitted to their roles and acknowledged meetings with PRC intelligence and united front officials ([Taipei Times](#), March 28). Although no direct links were found between the former military officers and the Bamboo Union, Chang An-lo was identified as the intermediary who introduced Wen to the chief clerk of the Zhuhai Municipal Taiwan Affairs Office, who in turn connected Wen with a military officer of the Political Department Liaison Bureau ([Liberty Times](#), March 28).

Conclusion

The activities of the Bamboo Union in conjunction with the CUPP are intended to subvert the authority of the Taiwanese government. The CCP's use of triad gangs such as the Bamboo Union is a core component of its united front strategy, which is designed to sow internal divisions and erode public trust in state institutions. As President Lai noted in his March speech, these efforts seek to "create the illusion that China is governing Taiwan" ([Office of the President](#), March 13).

The continued existence and financial success of triad gangs such as the Bamboo Union remains a thorn to civil society in Taiwan. If left unchecked, these groups will continue to erode the authority of the democratically elected government. Internationally, such gangs benefit from the tacit support of PRC united front and intelligence agencies, which overlook their criminal activities in exchange for advancing pro-unification messaging. However, while public intelligence disclosures and criminal cases implicate certain gang members, there is little evidence to suggest that Taiwan's criminal networks constitute a coordinated "fifth column" prepared to assist a PRC takeover. Rather, their involvement reflects the CCP's broad united front strategy, which seeks to co-opt actors across all sectors of society.

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Notes

[1] While the Bamboo Union remains the most prominent gang supporting unification and participating in united front activities, others such as the Four Seas gang have also been implicated. In 2017, members of the Four Seas gang were reportedly involved in the assault of Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong and three others—Edward Yiu, Nathan Law and Eddie Chu—upon their arrival at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport on January 7. The activists were confronted and attacked by around a 100 people associated with the pro-China Patriot Association.

Leading the attack on Joshua Wong and his Hong Kong associates was Chang Wei (張瑋), son of Chang An-lo. The Taipei police also identified Chen Tzu-chun (陳子俊), a known chapter leader of the Four Seas Gang, as a participant. While Chen was detained, Chang Wei was released and quickly left Taiwan—reportedly relocating to Mexico, where he is believed to run a company ([Taipei Times](#), January 15, 2017).

In 2024, Taiwan's Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) in coordination with a multi-agency task force arrested 12 members of the Celestial Alliance (天道盟), also known as the Tiandao League. The gang, reportedly founded in 1986 inside the Taipei Detention Center by inmates seeking to counter the dominance of Bamboo Union members, was found to be engaged in intelligence work for the PRC. The investigation in 2024 revealed that members had recruited Taiwan military personnel to sell sensitive information. One female member, who owned a temple used for cross-strait religious exchanges, leveraged her travel to the PRC to facilitate espionage. She recruited financially vulnerable military personnel, coercing them into filming pro-PRC videos in front of the PRC flag ([CIB](#), October 24, 2024; [China Brief](#), May 9).

[2] Subsequent reporting suggested that Liu was no longer in the running ([MSN](#), March 20).

Guns of September: What a Parade May Reveal About PRC Military Modernization

By John S. Van Oudenaren



Guard of Honor of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. (Source: Xinhua)

Executive Summary:

- The People's Republic of China's (PRC) upcoming military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War Two will serve as both a symbolic display and an operational exercise, highlighting the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) advancements in new combat domains—such as unmanned systems, directed energy, and electronic warfare—while also revealing improvements in command structure and organizational capacity. The parade aims to underscore loyalty to Xi Jinping as central to combat readiness, even as recent purges expose deep institutional instability and a persistent “trust deficit” between the Party and the PLA. These tensions underscore the regime's challenge in balancing political control with genuine military professionalization
- The PLA will use the parade to demonstrate its growing joint capabilities, showcasing an integrated “Four Services + Four Arms” model and the role of new branches like the Aerospace and Cyberspace Forces. The involvement of militia units and strategic strike formations further emphasizes the whole-of-force approach underpinning China's military modernization trajectory.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is finalizing plans for its massive 80th anniversary commemoration of victory in the “Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression” (中国人民抗日战争) and “World Anti-Fascist War” (世界反法西斯战争) ([People’s Daily](#), June 25). The event, to be held in Beijing on September 3, will feature a troop review and speech by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary and Central Military Commission (CMC) Chairman Xi Jinping. Global attention will likely fixate on the long columns of entirely domestically produced armored vehicles, missiles, and warplanes rolling through Tiananmen Square, highlighting the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) growing firepower ([China Daily](#), June 24; [Xinhua](#), June 25). The parade will also contain important indications about PLA command structure, organizational capacity, and operational readiness.

New Combat Forces on Display

In addition to traditional weapons and equipment, the parade will showcase “new combat forces” (新型作战力量), according to Major General Wu Zeke (吴泽棵), deputy director of the Military Parade Leading Group Office and deputy director general of the CMC Joint Staff Department’s Operations Bureau. Speaking at a June 24 state press conference on the planning for the commemoration, he said that this would reflect the PLA’s “strong ability to adapt to the scientific and technological developments and the evolution of conflict to win future wars” (适应科技发展和战争形态演变、打赢未来战争的强大能力) ([State Council Information Office \(SCIO\)](#), June 24). At a follow-up press conference on August 20, Wu detailed additional capabilities that will highlight the PLA’s improving combat capabilities in new domains and technological areas. These are set to include new land, sea, and air unmanned intelligent systems, directed energy weapons, and electronic jamming systems. The PLA will, per Wu, also use the parade to demonstrate its formidable strategic deterrent capability by exhibiting hypersonic, air and missile defenses, and strategic missiles ([SCIO](#), August 20).

Non-Material Indicators of Military Modernization

Beyond a burgeoning arsenal, the parade also will illuminate two less tangible yet equally essential elements of PLA modernization: command structure and organizational capacity. On both counts, it will seek to show it can rise to the mantra of “Toward 100 Years, Toward Victory” (向百年，向胜利), now ubiquitous in PRC propaganda ([81.cn](#); [China Military Network](#), July 25). The slogan reflects increased emphasis under Xi on reaching the goals set by his predecessors; namely, realizing full military modernization by 2035 and becoming a “world-class military” by mid-century. As a steppingstone in these efforts, Xi added the PLA’s centennial in 2027 as a key benchmark for several key elements of military modernization: advancing mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization; modernizing doctrine, organization, personnel management, and technology; maximizing resources; and building a strong defense industrial base ([China Brief](#), March 26, 2021).

At the August 20 briefing, Major General Xu Guizhong (徐贵忠) of the PLA Central Theater Command (解放军中部战区) stressed the parade’s operational nature as a test of the force’s organizational capacity, noting that effectively marshaling tens of thousands of troops and hundreds of weapons platforms is like “organizing for a major battle” (如同组织一场战役) ([SCIO](#), August 20). Indeed, CCTV reported that the second exercise in preparation for the parade on August 16-17 involved 40,000 troops ([81.cn](#), August 17).

Loyalty Remains a Weak Link

At the June press conference, Wu Zeke emphasized the link between political uprightness, loyalty to Xi and the Party, and military effectiveness ([SCIO](#), June 24). He stressed that the parade would showcase the PLA's "political construction, new force structure, progress in modernization, and achievements in combat readiness" (政治建军新风貌、力量结构新布局、现代化建设新进展、备战打仗新成效), all downstream of "resolutely following the Party's command" (坚决听党指挥). Wu made certain to praise Xi, exclaiming how his leadership enables the PLA to "advance the spirit of the War of Resistance" (弘扬抗战精神).

Loyalty was a prominent theme again on Army Day (August 1), with a *PLA Daily* editorial calling for "forging political loyalty" (铸牢政治忠诚) and fighting the "decisive battle" (攻坚之战) to achieve the PLA's centenary goals ([PLA Daily](#), August 1). The article pledges that the PLA will thoroughly implement Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Military and the CMC Chairman Responsibility system. The shift over the past decade toward this new system and away from the previous CMC Vice-Chairman Responsibility System reflects Xi's efforts to centralize organizational control over the PLA, which has enjoyed substantial autonomy throughout the reform era ([China Leadership Monitor](#), July 14). As analysts Joel Wuthnow and Philip Saunders note in *China's Quest for Military Supremacy*, Xi has pulled multiple levers to tighten the CCP's grip on the PLA: re-emphasizing Party work and indoctrination as a part of a broader recommitment to Marxist principals; promoting his personal authority, including through promulgating Xi Jinping Thought in the military; implementing stricter personnel control; and strengthening oversight regimes ([Google Books](#), March 10).

The Party must manage a careful balancing act between demanding loyalty while allowing the PLA a degree of autonomy on organizational, technical, and even operational matters to achieve modernization. As a result, the scourge of corruption in the military and defense industry persists, and loyalty to the CCP appears to remain conditional, predicated on the PLA's occupation of a place of privilege in the PRC system ([Observer Research Foundation](#), December 2, 2024). The difficulty of maintaining this balance has been laid bare in the upheaval at the top levels in recent months. The CMC has been decimated by purges, to the extent that only three of six uniformed military seats are now filled, with several members removed or disappeared since 2023, including apparent Xi loyalists, underscoring what K. Tristan Tang describes as Xi's "trust deficit" with the PLA (China Brief, [January 17](#), [February 14](#), [April 11](#)).

Joint Enough

The upcoming parade is an opportunity for the PLA to show it is sufficiently "joint" to achieve the ambitious goals laid out by Xi's Thought ([CGTN](#), October 11, 2022). The troop review will seek to demonstrate the PLA's improving capacity for joint operations that integrate different services, groups, and teams via the new joint command, operations, and support model ([SCIO](#), June 24). At the August 20 press conference, Major General Wu stated the parade reflects the PLA's new "Four Services + Four Arms" (支军种+4 支兵种) structure ([SCIO](#), August 20). This system was codified on Army Day, when Xi conferred flags on the aerospace, cyberspace, and information support forces established in April 2024, as well as the Joint Logistics Support Force created in 2016 to coordinate logistical support for major military operations ([Xinhuanet](#), September 13, 2016; [China Aerospace Studies Institute \(CASI\)](#), April 22, 2024; China Brief, [April 26, 2024](#), [April 25](#), [July 11 81.cn](#), July 31;). The elevation of these organizations underscores the PLA's growing cognizance that the complexity of network-

centric warfare requires the adoption of a military structure more akin to a U.S.-style joint force ([Defense One](#), April 28, 2024).

The parade's equipment formation will be organized according to practical joint combat strategies, including land and maritime combat groups, air and missile defense groups, information combat groups, unmanned combat groups, support groups, and strategic strike groups ([SCIO](#), August 20). The aerial formation will highlight the systematization and rapidly improving combat capabilities of the PLA's air combat forces ([SCIO](#), June 24). This includes continuing refinement of its division of labor in terms of aerospace operations between the Air Force (bolstered by the recent transfer of former PLA Navy aviation units), the Rocket Force, the Aerospace Force, the remaining PLAN aerial assets, and the PLA Army Aviation and Air Defense Branches (CASI, [July 31, 2023](#), [July 2024](#)).

Militia forces also will participate in the parade, an important reminder that the PLA includes not only its services and arms and the People's Armed Police (including the Coast Guard) but also a large militia ([SCIO](#), June 24). The militia, which is organized by local People's Armed Forces Departments and includes maritime militia operating in the South China Sea, serves as a reserve and auxiliary force for the PLA ([China Brief](#), March 15).

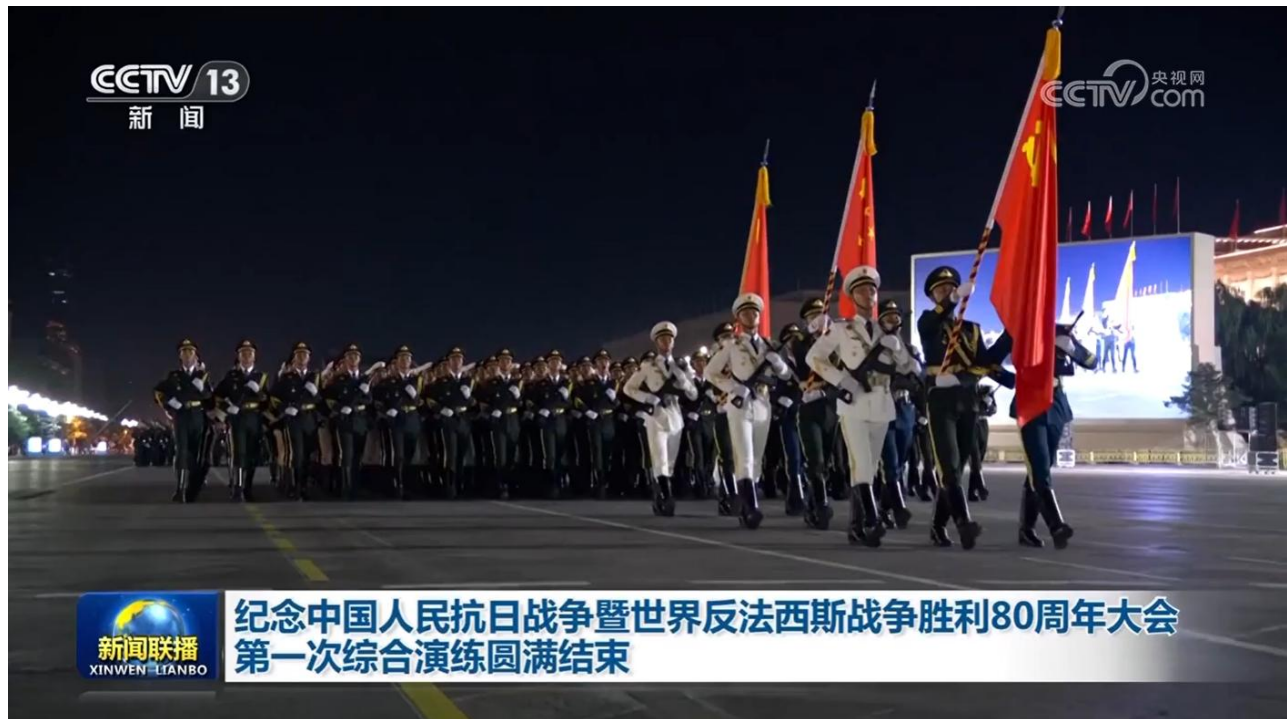
Conclusion

The operational aspect of the military parade preparations underscores that readiness remains paramount for the PLA. As the scholar Taylor Fravel recently observed, despite the costs to operational readiness of Xi's recent large-scale purges, the PLA must be prepared to fight now, not just by 2035 or 2049 ([Foreign Affairs](#), July 18). Fravel notes that, from 1949 to 1979, Chinese leaders often felt compelled to go to war at moments when the PLA's readiness was questionable. In the same way, while the force that struts through Beijing next month may be doing so to honor past victory, the troops will be marching in preparation for the next war and, in their eyes, future triumph.

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PLA Declares World-Class Ambitions with ‘Strongest Army’ Benchmark

By W.Y. Kwok



The PLA's first rehearsal for the September 3 Victory Day Parade for the 80th anniversary of the victory in the War against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War. (Source: [CCTV Screenshot](#), August 10)

Executive Summary:

- For the first time, an official Chinese publication explicitly defines its goal to “establish a world-class army” as equivalent to the “world’s strongest military,” marking a direct competitive framework with the United States and other leading powers.
- Released weeks before the Victory Day parade commemorating Japan’s defeat and following the founding anniversary of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the commentary leverages historical symbolism to declare CCP’s readiness to compete with, and potentially challenge, the existing global military order.
- President Xi Jinping has expedited its “three-step” modernization schedule since 2017, moving basic military modernization from mid-century to 2035 while targeting a critical 2027 centenary milestone, despite acknowledging ongoing “inadequate capabilities” and “significant gaps” compared to advanced global militaries. The commentary also heavily emphasizes the Party’s “absolute leadership” over the PLA, signaling Xi’s effort to reinforce military control while questions persist about his authority over the armed forces.

One week after “Army Day” (八一建军节), the August 1 anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the *People’s Daily* published a commentary titled “Deeply Understand the Significant Original Contributions to Building a World-Class Military in All Respects” (深刻把握全面建成世界一流军队的重大原创性贡献) ([People’s Daily](#), August 7). The piece, written by a professor at the National University of Defense Technology, traces national defense and military strategy development since 1997 and emphasizes Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping’s 2016 goal of “building a world-class army” (建设世界一流军队).

The article establishes that the definition of “world-class” must embody universal standards, making vertical comparisons within the PLA insufficient. Instead, the PLA must reference the “world’s strongest military” (实力最强的军队)—an implicit nod to that of the United States—and assess itself on the global stage. Beyond weaponry, organizational structure, and combat systems, the PLA must achieve world-class standards in military theory, personnel development, and training to realize both “leapfrog strength” (跨越之强) through continuous self-transformation and “surpassing strength” (超越之强) to compete against global rivals.

This marks the first time an official article has explicitly defined the standards of a “world-class army” as equivalent to the “world’s strongest military.” Previously, the closest official description called for establishing an army “commensurate with my country’s status as a powerful nation” (同我国强国地位相称), capable of comprehensively defending national security with strong international influence ([PLA Daily](#), June 8, 2023; [PRC Ministry of National Defense](#), August 5, 2023). While the article does not specify which nation possesses the world’s strongest military, the United States is clearly the primary reference point.

Accelerated Timeline and 2027 Milestone

The article frames the current era as one of military revolution, driven by scientific, technological, and industrial advances. The author argues that is present a “once-in-a-lifetime historical opportunity” (千载难逢的历史机遇) for “strategic overtaking” (弯道超车), warning that failing to seize the moment could result in the PLA losing an entire era (抓不住就可能错过整整一个时代). For the PLA, seizing the moment entails building an “informatized army” (信息化军队), as well as preparing for “intelligentized warfare” (智能化战争) through integrating artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and cloud computing.

Xi has unveiled a new “three-step” (三步走) strategic arrangement—an update on a previous “three-step” arrangement first announced in 1997, [1] accelerating the timeline for “basic realization of national defense and military modernization” (基本实现国防和军队现代化) from mid-century to 2035, while reaffirming the 2027 “centenary goal” (建军百年奋斗目标). However, it also acknowledges critical challenges. It concedes that the PLA continues to face the “two inadequate capabilities” (两个能力不够), referring to gaps in meeting national security demands and conducting modern warfare, and “two significant gaps” (两个差距很大) between PRC’s military and global advanced standards. These admissions highlight the urgency and difficulty of building a world-class military on an accelerated timeline.

The specific 2027 centenary objectives remain deliberately vague in official statements, with only general calls to enhance strategic capabilities for safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests ([PLA Daily](#), August 5, 2023). Despite this ambiguity, U.S. officials have explicitly warned against dismissing the possibility that the PLA may aim to be ready for a Taiwan invasion by 2027, underscoring growing concerns over the PRC's military intentions and capabilities ([U.S. Congress](#), July 25).

At the PLA founding anniversary reception, Defense Minister Dong Jun (董军) made an unusually direct reference to Taiwan, declaring that the PLA stands ready to achieve complete unification and repel any foreign military interference ([Xinhua](#), July 31). As the PLA becoming increasingly aggressive toward Taiwan, the timing of this statement—alongside references to competing with the world's strongest military—signals both Xi Jinping's intent to stabilize top military leadership and the PLA's ambition to assert itself on the global stage ([China Brief](#), May 12).

Questions Over Xi's Military Control

The article asserts that Xi's goal of building a world-class military represents “value transcendence” (价值超越) over Western military powers. (This forms the subheading of its concluding section.) Unlike Western militaries, which the article characterizes as pursuing coercion, expansion, and hegemony, the PLA's development aims to maintain regional and world peace. This value system is anchored in the CCP's “absolute leadership” (绝对领导), upholding the people's stance, and effectively fulfilling new era missions, serving as “ballast stones” (压舱石) for world peace.

The same day, the Party's theory journal *Qiushi* published an editorial penned by the Central Military Commission (CMC). This piece reinforced the same themes, reflecting on victory in the Anti-Japanese War while emphasizing absolute CCP leadership and calling for study of Xi's theories on strengthening the army ([Qiushi](#), August 1).

The emphasis on the CCP's control comes amid significant military personnel changes. Since 2023, an unusually large number of operational commanders and key PLA leaders have been purged, including extended vacancies in the Beijing Garrison command (中国人民解放军北京卫戍区) and the dismissal of CMC Political Work Department head Miao Hua (苗华). This constitutes one of the largest overhauls of the military leadership since the Mao era. Despite Xi's efforts to control the PLA, ongoing purges and his lack of military background may limit his authority ([China Brief](#), July 26).

Conclusion

This commentary represents a clear trajectory in CCP and PLA military strategy. Domestically, the repeated emphasis on the Party's “absolute leadership” functions as Xi's consolidation of control over the PLA, particularly relevant amid recent high-level purges and uncertainties within the military hierarchy. The message is unambiguous: for both PLA officers and Party cadres, unwavering loyalty to Xi remains the foundational principle of service.

Externally, the explicit benchmarking against the world's strongest military constitutes an unprecedented declaration of competitive ambition, effectively announcing the CCP's determination to achieve military parity with, or even potentially surpass, the United States and other leading powers by 2027 and 2035.

Published just weeks before the September 3 Victory Day parade commemorating Japan's defeat, where the PRC is set to showcase its latest weaponry and military modernization achievements ([The Paper](#), June 24; [MND](#), August 20), the commentary leverages the 80th anniversary of this "great victory" (伟大胜利) to reinforce the CCP's narratives of the PRC as a major power.

While the 2027 centenary goals remain deliberately ambiguous, the convergence of accelerated modernization timelines, aggressive rhetoric on Taiwan, and explicit declarations of global military competition suggest that the PLA views this milestone as more than symbolic. Whether this translates to concrete military action, particularly regarding Taiwan, remains uncertain. However, the commentary leaves little doubt about the CCP's intent to position the PLA as a tool not only for national defense, but for reshaping the global security order. The article ultimately reveals that the PLA is now confident enough to publicly declare its global military ambitions, even as it works to reassert internal control, a dual-track message that projects strength while hinting at lingering institutional tensions within the PLA's military modernization drive.

Notes

[1] The original "three-step" development strategy unveiled by the Party Center and the CMC, included laying a solid foundation for the modernization of the national defense and the military by 2010, bringing about a major development in the modernization of the national defense and the military in the second decade of the twenty-first century, and basically realizing the modernization of national defense and the military by the middle of the century.