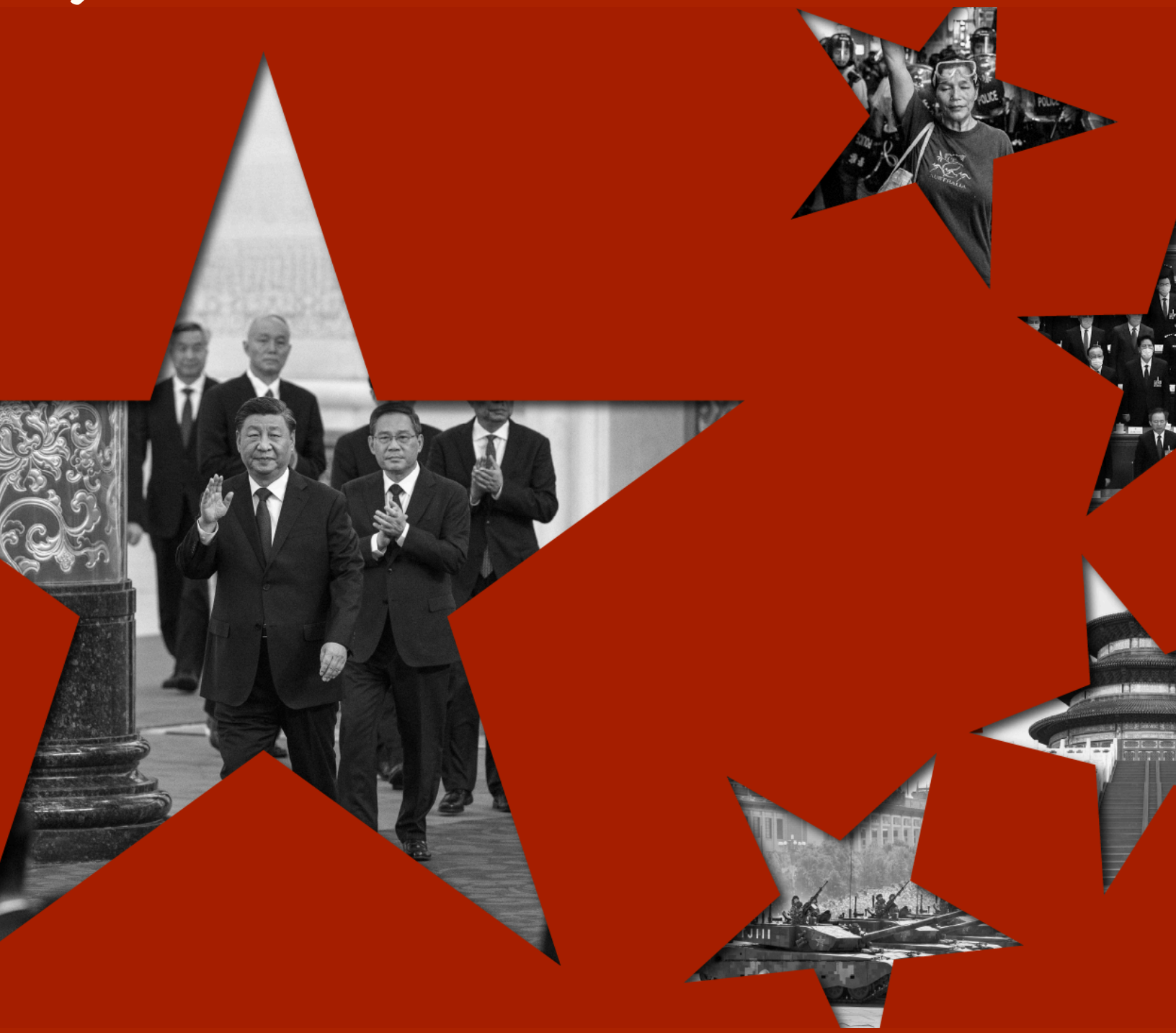
Jamestown

December 6, 2025



China Brief

Volume 25, Issue 22

In This Issue

China Brief

Notes

Launch of a Shijian-series satellite in November 2025. (Source: Xinhua)

Dual-Use Shijian Satellite Program Ramps up in 2025

Arran Hope
December 6, 2025

Executive Summary

- A secretive program of experimental dual-use satellites has accelerated its launch cadence in 2025, sending six satellites into orbit—more than in the last four years combined.
- Shijian satellites have displayed impressive capabilities, including towing and refuelling other satellites, and even deploying additional, smaller satellites.
- The lack of data released about their operations indicates their dual-use potential, as does the apparent alignment of the program with military strategy documents that call for dominating control of space.
- The upcoming five-year plan is set to increase investment and support for space development, which the Party leadership identifies as a strategic emerging industry.

In a Fortnight

The year 2025 has been a successful one for the *Shijian* (实践) satellite program. Things kicked off on January 6 with the launch of the Shijian-25 satellite, which state media hailed as a "bright start to China's space program in 2025" (国航天2025年开门红) (Xinhua, January 7). Since then, a Shijian-26 satellite was sent into orbit in late May, followed by three Shijian-30 satellites in mid-November, and a final Shijian-28 satellite on November 30 (Xinhua, May 29, November 19, November 30). These six launches mark an uptick in cadence for the program, with just one launch in each of the two previous years and none in 2022. A total of 50 Shijian-series satellites have been launched since the program began in 1971, of which 38 remain operational (Wikipedia/实践系列卫星, accessed December 5). **[1]**

The Shijian series is just one among as many as 100 satellite programs in the People's Republic of China (PRC) today (Hello Space, April 18). What makes it unusual is that it is used to "put into practice" or "establish best practices for"—the literal meanings of *shijian* (实践)—novel satellite technologies (CASI, March 28, 2022). It also stands out because of the paucity of publicly available data about its goals and activities compared to other programs. The coverage of Shijian satellites that does exist indicates that they are primarily used for scientific exploration and technological verification and testing. But omissions from the PRC side, coupled with observations and reporting from analysts in the United States and elsewhere, suggest that they likely are involved in much more sensitive operations.

Beijing Seeks Space Control Capabilities

Understanding Beijing's approach to space can help contextualize the potential use cases of many Shijian satellites. Military strategy documents and resources have repeatedly described space as a critical domain for national and control of space as a prerequisite for successful military operations in the 21st century. The 2013 Lectures on the Science of Space Operations (空间作战学教程), for example, argues that the "whoever seizes command of space will be able to look down on and control the other battlefields" and that "command of space … has become crucial in seizing and holding the initiative in warfare" (Jiang, 2013). **[2]** Subsequent documents have built on this logic. The 2020 edition of the Science of Military Strategy (战略学), the PLA's most authoritative source on military strategy, similarly describes space as "a new strategic commanding height for international military competition." In the view of the authors, "it is necessary to build a powerful military space force" to "meet the challenges of the world's new military revolution and win information warfare" (Xiao, 2020). **[3]**

Beijing's broader defense industrial and national development plans reinforce this trajectory. The recent "Recommendations" (建议) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee for the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan call for the PRC to "accelerate the building of … a strong space country" (加快建设制造 … 航天强国). This comes in the very first sentence of the document's section on building a modernized industrial system and consolidate the foundation of the real economy. It is reinforced by later calls for supporting "strategic emerging industries" (战略性新兴产业), including aerospace. The document also doubles down on the national strategy of military-civil fusion. It calls for "deepening reforms that straddle military and civil domains" (深化跨军地改革) and for "accelerating strategic capability development in emerging domains" (加快新兴领域战略能力建设), promoting the "mutual reinforcement of new productive forces and new combat capabilities" (新质生产力同新质战斗力高效融合、双向拉动) (Xinhua, October 28).

Shijian Satellites Exhibit Impressive Technologies

Evidence of impressive progress in the Shijian program, along with the rest of the PRC's space industry, is abundant. For example, Shijian-25, launched in January 2025, reportedly is "mainly used for technology verification of satellite refueling and life extension services" (主要用于卫星燃料补加与延寿服务技术验证) (Xinhua, January 7). Commercial analysts have noted that it appears to be equipped with some kind of grappling arm (CSM, January 18). In July, the satellite apparently successfully refueled a Beidou satellite with 142 kilograms of fuel. One commentary claims that it can refuel up to 20 different satellites, and states that it is known as a "super-space refueling station" (超级太空加油站) (BJS, November 30).

This is not the first time a satellite has used robotic arms of various kinds in space. U.S. government reports have said that the PRC has used such devices powered by artificial intelligence (AI) for satellite maintenance, refueling, and removal of space debris (USCC, November 2025). Most famously, a Shijian-21 satellite in January 2022 docked with the defunct Beidou navigation satellite before towing it to a higher "graveyard orbit," where it would pose no risk of collision with other satellites (BJS, November 30; U.S. House of Representatives, December 4). The Xinhua announcement of its launch simply described the satellite as "mainly used for testing and verifying space debris mitigation technologies" (主要用于空间碎片减缓技术试验验证) (Xinhua, October 24, 2021).

The Shijian program also appears to be expanding into working with a wider set of technologies. The commercial analyst Blaine Curcio noted in June that the Shijian-26 that was launched in May was built by a consortium of CAST, the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT), and the CAS Changchun Institute of Optics and Precision Mechanics (CIOPM), in a "noteworthy" departure from previous satellites (CSM, June 8).

The launch also underscores the potential dual-use nature of Shjian satellites. HIT is sanctioned by the U.S. government for its work on military technologies, while the Chang Guang Satellite Technology Corporation, a commercial offshoot of CIOPM, is also sanctioned for allegedly providing geospatial intelligence to the Houthis to target U.S. warships in the Red Sea crisis, as well as to the Wagner Group in Ukraine (Reuters, April 17; Open Sanctions, accessed December 5 [1], [2]).

Conclusion

The lack of information about the Shijian program feeds into the PRC's space deterrence (威慑) strategy (Rice, August 2025). **[4]** As the Lectures on the Science of Space Operations Foreign Military Thought point out, strengthening deception, feints, and concealment in space operations is crucial "to achieve the goals of confusing and out-maneuvering the enemy and of creating errors in the enemy's judgment and decision-making." It can also enhance the prestige of the PRC space program. By restricting releases to emphasize civilian functionalities and successful successful maneuvers, Beijing can build partnerships with other countries to enhance its own role as a space power (China Brief, March 1, 2024, November 5, 2024).

The precise goals of the four satellites deployed in November remain to be seen. It is unlikely that the PRC will release additional information about them, but their maneuvers can be tracked. But the apparent expansion of the program over the course of this year could indicate a ramping up of PRC deployments of new satellite technologies, including those with dual-use applications, that pose a risk to those Beijing

views as adversaries. Given the sector's explicit backing in authoritative planning documents, the country's space capabilities are set to further take off over the next five years. By that point, Chinese taikonauts may have already beaten their U.S. counterparts in an ambition both countries have set for themselves—to once again set foot on the Moon.

Arran Hope is the editor of China Brief at The Jamestown Foundation.

Notes

[1] The Wikipedia data is compiled from NORAD, NASA, USSPACECOM, Celestrak, and Gunter's Space Page.

[2] Jiang Lianju [姜连举] and Wang Liwen [王立文] ed. Lectures on the Science of Space Operations Foreign Military Thought [空间作战学教程], trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute. Military Science Press, January 2013.

[3] Xiao Tianliang, ed. The Science of Military Strategy, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute. Military Science Press, 2020.

[4] Daniel C. Rice. "Understanding Weishe, China's System of Strategic Coercion." *China Military Studies Review* 1, No. 1., August 2025.

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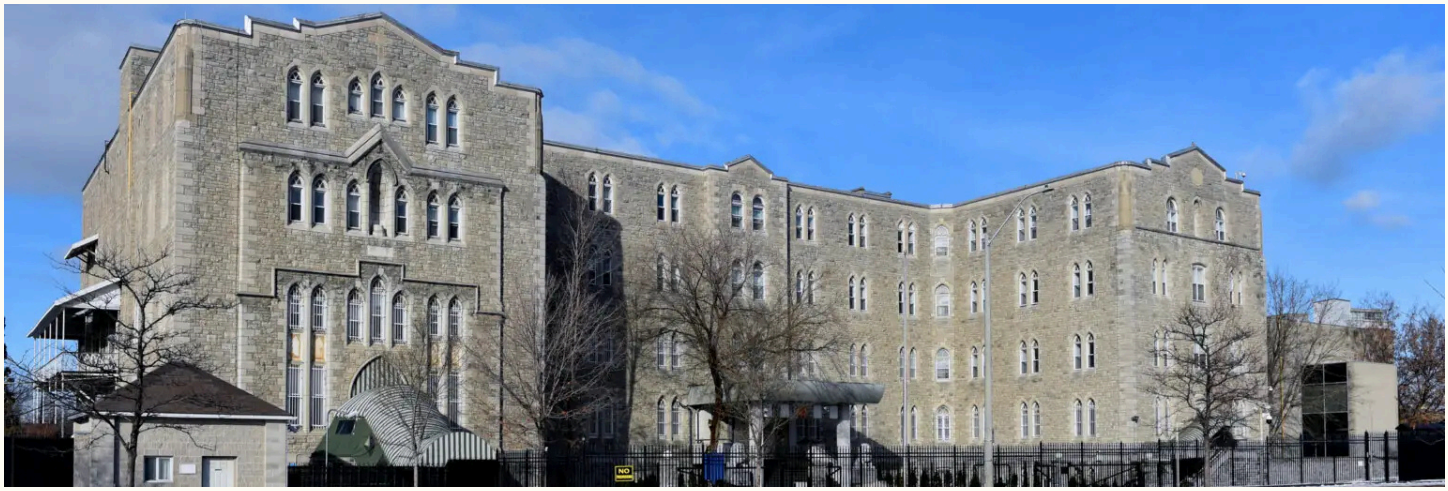


PRC Embassy in Ottawa, Canada. (Source: Getty)

Consular Pop-Ups in Canada Advance Local United Front Work

Sze-Fung Lee
December 2, 2025

Executive Summary

- Since 2015, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Canada, along with PRC consulates in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and Calgary, have organized at least 105 gray zone activities in 22 cities across 11 provinces.
- These consular "pop-up" events threaten Canada's national security and undermine its sovereignty, democracy, and the rules-based international order. They operate outside of designated diplomatic facilities that enjoy extraterritorial protections and likely without the consent of the Canadian government.

- The events are framed as providing consular services to the diaspora community in Canada, but they also provide opportunities for political work, including influence operations, surveillance and coercion, and overseas political mobilization.
- The PRC's strategy in Canada differs from that used in the United States. In Canada, all consulates and the embassy are involved, events are more evenly distributed across the country, and they specifically target provincial capitals rather than major cities. Consulates also co-host with a smaller set of community organizations, and tend to hold events in private, rather than public, spaces.

Over the past decade, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has organized and hosted consular pop-ups across the United States at non-diplomatic facilities, such as Chinese restaurants and supermarkets (China Brief, October 21, 2024). These events are likely part of a global operation under the political initiative of "bringing consular services into the community/grassroots" (领事服务进社区/基层). PRC consulates have conducted similar activities in Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, Hungary, Tanzania, Jamaica, and beyond. Consular services provided by local offices currently appear limited in scope, by vary by country. Deeper investigation of activities in Canada indicate that it is an outlier, with consular officials hosting an extensive array of activities over the last decade.

As of November 2025, PRC diplomats had held over 100 pop-up events across 11 provinces and 22 cities in Canada since 2015. These events can be seen as "gray zone" activities, as they exploit an ambiguity in international law. It is unclear whether pop-up–style consular service events in non-designated diplomatic facilities are legal. Given that these events also serve as a mechanism for political activities and influence operations through community outreach, they may constitute violations of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (International Law Commission, 2005). **[1]** Even if they were to be found to operate within the letter of the law, however, legality does not equal diplomatic norm compliance. The PRC's extensive organization of pop-ups across the world remains an unusual practice. It not only exacerbates Beijing's preexisting extraterritorial law enforcement efforts but also creates new norms that fundamentally challenge the international rules-based order.

This scale of operations is much larger than in the United States. All PRC consulates and the PRC Embassy in Canada are involved, targeting most provincial capitals. This likely reflects a sub-national strategy aimed at maximizing influence at the provincial level. Their increased intensity in recent years may also be a response to high-profile cases of PRC influence in Canada in recent years that limit the utility of a national-level strategy.

Consular Pop-Ups as Gray Zone Activities Across Canada

Starting in 2015, the PRC Embassy in Canada, along with PRC consulates in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and Calgary, have organized at least 105 gray zone activities. The venues for these events range from hotel conference rooms and Chinese cultural centers to university classrooms and clubhouses. Such pop-up events have been organized under the initiative of "bringing consular services into the community," as a manifestation of "people-centered diplomacy" (外交为民) (WeChat/PRC Consulate in Toronto, October 24, 2018).

These events have taken place in 22 cities across 11 provinces: Edmonton in Alberta; Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo, Prince George, and Victoria in British Columbia; Winnipeg in Manitoba; Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John in New

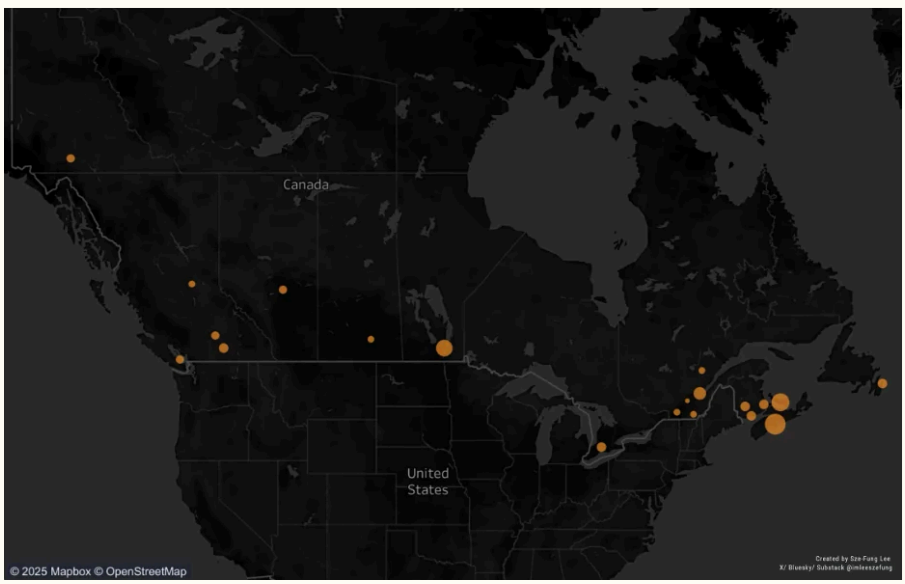
Brunswick; St. John's in Newfoundland and Labrador; Halifax in Nova Scotia; London and Windsor in Ontario; Charlottetown in Prince Edward Island; Montréal, Québec City, Saguenay, Sherbrooke, and Trois-Rivières in Québec; Regina in Saskatchewan; and Whitehorse in Yukon. The most recent activity took place in London, Ontario, on November 1. It was organized by the PRC Consulate in Toronto (author research, November 2025).

The events likely violate international law. This is because they provide consular services but operate outside of designated diplomatic facilities that enjoy extraterritorial protection. It is also unlikely that the Canadian government has consented to such activities. Even if consent were obtained, evidence suggests that these events go beyond consular services by also providing a platform for political activities. This includes influence operations and cognitive warfare targeting Chinese diaspora communities, united front work strengthening the PRC's capacity for overseas political mobilization, and the creation of new norms that exacerbate Beijing's preexisting extraterritorial law enforcement efforts.

In 2022, for instance, Deputy Consul General Hong Hong (洪红) led a team from the Toronto Consulate to host two on-site document processing sessions in Manitoba. Hong described the events as an effort to align with directives from the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to explore approaches to enhance the well-being of and strengthen ties with overseas Chinese communities (Consulate-General of the PRC in Toronto, December 8, 2022). Representatives from the Toronto Consulate hosted events in a Chinese Cultural Center on November 26 and, on November 27, far outside Toronto at the University of Manitoba with the help of the Winnipeg Chinese Cultural and Community Center (温城中华文化中心), Fenghua Voice (枫华之家), and the University of Manitoba Chinese Students and Scholars Association (曼尼托巴大学中国学生学者联谊会) (WeChat/PRC Consulate in Toronto, November 18, 2022).

A WeChat article published by the Toronto Consulate also claims that the consular team made a "special trip" (专程) to an elderly couple's residence in Manitoba to process their passport renewal application when they were unable to

Figure 1: Distribution Map of Pop-Up Events in Canada, 2015–2025



(Source: Author's research)

attend an event (PRC Consulate in Toronto, December 8, 2022). Home visits (上门办证) like this are an unusual diplomatic practice. They are questionable on legal grounds, but more importantly they carry significant security implications. This is because they may function as tools for surveillance or coercion under the guise of "consular services," and could be used to impose direct or indirect pressure on individuals Beijing deems to be political threats.

This sets a potentially alarming precedent for the PRC's growing and pervasive efforts to extend its outreach and exert control over diaspora communities. In the name of providing consular services, PRC officials are knocking on doors on Canadian soil—likely with diplomatic immunity. While consent is required to justify these activities, it likely can be fabricated by consular officials. These gray-zone activities, therefore, pose a significant threat concealed within Beijing's broader coercive repatriation campaigns and transnational repression. They create new norms that exacerbate Beijing's extraterritorial law enforcement efforts and challenge the international rules-based order.

Sub-National Focus Across Canada, Unlike in the United States

All PRC consulates in Canada, as well as the PRC embassy, are involved in the pop-up events. The embassy in Ottawa appears to play a significant role. It has organized 35 activities over the past decade, making it the organizer of the largest number of events in Canada. Pop-ups hosted by other consulates are more evenly distributed, with each having managed 19–26 events. This contrasts with the situation in the United States, in which only some consulates are involved in such activities. The large scale and balanced distribution of events in Canada suggests that a more coordinated and centralized country-wide strategy might lie behind them, rather than a localized or fragmented approach.

Events in Canada are all held in more controlled settings than in the United States. Instead of being hosted in public spaces, Canadian consular events take place in semi-private settings where participation generally requires advance registration. **[2]** Starting around March 2024, for instance, the PRC Consulate in

Figure 2: Pop-Up Consular Service Events in Winnipeg, November 26–27, 2022

(Source: PRC Consulate in Toronto, December 8, 2022)

Vancouver began to withhold venue locations until registration (PRC Consulate in Vancouver, March 16, 2024). This comparatively careful and controlled operational approach suggests that consulates have sought to keep these gray zone activities under the radar.

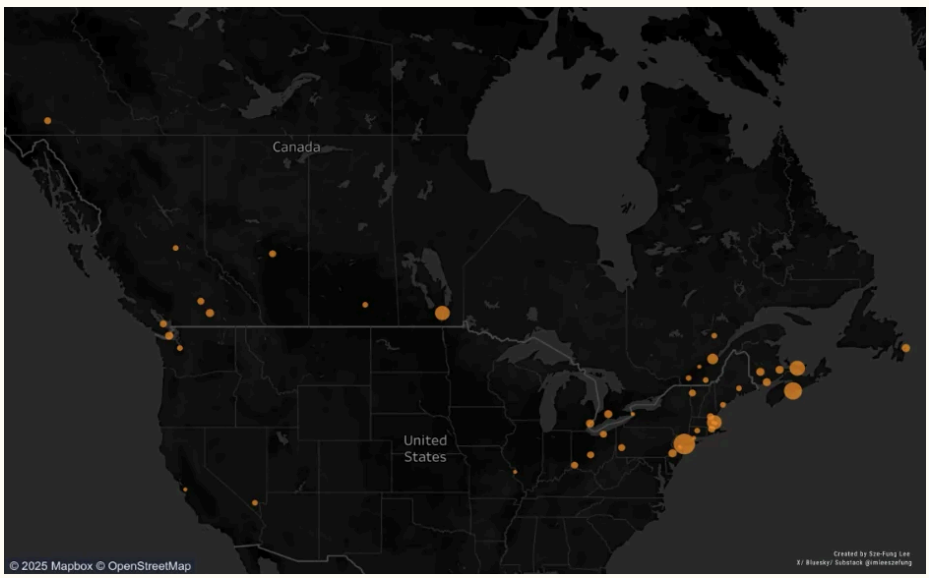
A much more limited set of co-hosting organizations have been involved in pop-up events in Canada than in the United States. Data indicate that events often use the same venues repeatedly, suggesting a smaller network of local partners. This, however, is likely influenced by geography, as a majority of events in Canada have been held in small and mid-size cities and provincial capitals like Edmonton, Kamloops, Prince George, Winnipeg, and Halifax, where Chinese diaspora communities are smaller and local entities are fewer. Beyond operational differences, the decision by consular officials to host events in these cities may also reflect a strategic agenda that differs from the one followed in the United States.

Compared with U.S. operations, events in Canada target provincial capitals and smaller regional centers rather than major metropolitan areas. This suggests that influence operations for ideological warfare and united front network building remain a central objective, but at a sub-national level. As shown in Figure 1 above, the highest number of gray zone activities have taken place in Halifax (19), Charlottetown (14), and Winnipeg (12).

Notably, 10 out of Canada's 14 provincial and territorial capitals have been targeted, indicating a strategic focus on administrative and regional hubs. **[3]** The exceptions are Ottawa, Toronto, Iqaluit, and Yellowknife, which are likely excluded as they do not align with the sub-national united front strategy. Ottawa, the national capital, and Toronto, Canada's largest city, are large metropolitan centers; while Iqaluit and Yellowknife are likely too remote to make influence operations viable or worthwhile.

Targeting administrative and regional hubs aligns with the traditional united front strategy of "leveraging local power to encircle the central authority" (以地方包围中央) or "encircling the cities from the countryside" (农村包围城市). This strategy was developed by Mao in the late 1920s.

Figure 3: Distribution Map of Pop-Up Events in Canada and the United States, 2015–2025



(Source: Author's research)

At the time, Mao argued that because the CCP was weaker than its adversary it should first focus on building power and influence in rural areas before expanding outward through guerrilla tactics (News of the Communist Party of China, accessed December 1). In essence, sub-national united front work aims to co-opt, influence, and manipulate individuals and groups at the local level to gradually isolate and pressure central authorities to align with the Party's political agenda. By influencing multiple provincial capitals simultaneously and coordinating operations in other cities within the same provinces, Beijing could maximize its influence on provincial policymaking and gain sufficient leverage to push back against unfavorable federal policies at the provincial level while shaping policy at the national level.

PRC influence operations, and especially united front work, have faced significant pushback at the national level in Canada. The detention of Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in the PRC, revelations about overseas PRC police stations and electoral interference, and a public inquiry into foreign interference, likely have led the PRC to shift its tactics. Beijing's focus on provincial capitals could exploit gaps and advance its united front work in relatively untapped areas. From the PRC's perspective, sub-national efforts can influence decision-making at the local and provincial level while minimizing attention at the national level. This may also explain attempts to operate in controlled, rather than public, settings. Another possible reason for avoiding larger cities like Toronto is that they already have large Chinese diaspora presences and well-developed united front networks that the Party can mobilize for kinetic events, such as counterprotests.

The Party's wider objectives for gray-zone consular activities are currently unclear, beyond strengthening united front networks. But by expanding capabilities to influence provincial capitals, Beijing could target a wide range of political and strategic sectors, including Canada's critical minerals, which exist in virtually every province.

Conclusion

PRC consular gray zone activities should be viewed as part of a broader hybrid warfare strategy rather than isolated incidents. Potential ramifications, such as political mobilization, should not be underestimated. Evidence indicates that these events continue to operate and remain largely unchecked in Canada, the United States, and beyond, despite published research and media coverage drawing attention to the issue (PRC Consulate in New York, August 8).

The wider context of this deepening gray zone strategy in Ottawa's re-engagement with the PRC under Prime Minister Mark Carney (Prime Minister of Canada; MFA, October 31). Currently, there is no publicly available data on whether the Canadian government is aware of PRC influence operations in the form of "pop-up" consular events that take place on Canadian soil. But these events undermine the country's sovereignty, democracy, and the rules-based international order; and above all, they represent a threat to Canada's national security and the security of Canadian citizens.

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Notes

[1] For more details, see the author's previous report on “pop-ups” in the United States (China Brief, June 7).

[2] Some U.S. events were also held in semi-private spaces, but they did not usually require advance registration.

[3] Targeted provincial and territorial capitals include St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Fredericton, New Brunswick; Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Québec, Quebec; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Regina, Saskatchewan; Edmonton, Alberta; Victoria, British Columbia; and Whitehorse, Yukon.

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Xi Jinping, flanked by Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un at a military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. (Source: Kevin Frayer/Getty Images)

PRC–Russia–DPRK Relations Grow Closer

Seong-Hyon Lee
November 25, 2025

Executive Summary

- Multiple Chinese readouts from the president-, premier-, and foreign minister-levels have omitted references to "denuclearization" following summits between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).
- Russia, the DPRK, and the PRC are engaged in a mutually-beneficial triangular relationship, which promotes diversification from Western dependence for Russia, regime survival for the DPRK, and a buffer that drains U.S. focus and resources for the PRC. The dynamic is not a formal alliance, nor is it a "marriage of convenience." It may be considered an "axis."

- Competition and bilateral frictions are still present, but the bloc continues to promote sanctions-resilience and satisfy the needs of each participant.

On September 4, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) published the readout of a leaders meeting between Xi Jinping and North Korea's Kim Jong Un. The document highlighted the themes of "traditional friendship" (传统友好), a "shared destiny" (命运与共), and "mutual vigilance and support" (守望相助). It called especially for deeper exchanges in the "governance of party and state affairs" (深化两党治国理政经验交流互鉴) (MFA, September 4). Notably, it omitted "denuclearization." Four weeks later, the official readout from the meeting between the two countries' foreign ministers similarly omitted the term, instead elevating governance exchanges among socialist parties (MFA, September 28). When Premier Li Qiang (李强) met Kim Jong Un on October 9, People's Daily coverage likewise celebrated "traditional friendship and cooperation" (传统友好合作关系) without reference to denuclearization (People's Daily, October 10). The pattern has now hardened into a deliberate tifa (提法)—a formalized policy wording.

This shift was further confirmed in Gyeongju during the November 1 APEC leaders' summit. South Korean President Lee Jae-myung held his first bilateral meeting with Xi, in which he called for PRC assistance on denuclearization of the peninsula (YouTube/Yonhap News TV, October 29). Yet the PRC readout entirely omitted the words "denuclearization" (无核化), "Korean Peninsula" (半岛), and "North Korea" (朝鲜) (MFA, November 1). This "split readout" was no clerical slip. In PRC political discourse, such formulation changes never occur by chance. A stock phrase dropped four times in three months across leader-, premier-, and minister-level texts signals deliberate recalibration. Beijing now acknowledges a nuclear Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as reality, not aberration.

Alignment Seen In North Korea, the CCP, and Chinese Provinces

This new policy was quickly visualized. The October 2025 "Victory Day" parade in Pyongyang that marked the 80th anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea offered a platform to demonstrate alignment. The PRC dispatched Premier Li Qiang, its highest-ranking emissary to the DPRK in over 15 years, while Russia sent Dmitry Medvedev. PRC and Russian dignitaries watched nuclear missiles parade through Kim Il Sung Square, underscoring a synchronized policy turn: both powers now treated denuclearization as a "closed issue" (The New York Times [NYT], October 11).

The parade, and the Xi–Kim meeting preceding it, granted the DPRK the recognition it craved by putting Kim on equal footing with the PRC and Russia. For Beijing, it restored the optics of a socialist front without paying the reputational cost of defending Pyongyang's arsenal outright. The omission of "denuclearization" became part of the face-saving choreography of triangular diplomacy.

The infrastructural aspects of this shift are occurring at the Party and provincial levels. At the top, the Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department (CCP ILD) has re-emerged as the core liaison to the Workers' Party, channeling diplomacy through ideological bonding. As Xi Jinping told Kim Jong-un, "both countries are socialist states led by communist parties" (两国都是共产党领导的社会主义国家) (China Brief, July 26, 2024; MFA, September 4). This is language Beijing usually reserves for comrades, not for transactional partners.

Below the Party layer, local leaders are restoring provincial networks. The 2024 "Friendship Year" produced quiet cooperation agreements on customs, postal exchanges, and broadcasting. Jilin's G331 Border Tourism Corridor opened in September 2025, linking Yalu and Tumen river towns across the international border (China News, September 29). The same week, the Shenyang–Baihe high-speed rail launched, connecting Changbai/Paektu to the national grid (Xinhua, September 28). Liaoning's Dandong plan envisions new airport and port facilities to recast the city as a hub for post-sanctions trade. When Ambassador Wang Yajun (王亚军) toured Hyesan and Samjiyon in June 2025, he urged expansion of "ice-and-snow" (冰雪) tourism, a euphemism for reopening frontier commerce (PRC Embassy in the DPRK, June 7). These projects, although mundane in appearance, show how normalization is implemented. They provide a more permanent, sanctions-resistant interface with Pyongyang. Together with the rhetorical omission of 'denuclearization,' they signal that Beijing is building a system designed not to defy the rules outright, but to render them obsolete over time.

Triangular Relations Yields Asymmetric Advantages

The PRC continues to benefit from its bilateral ties with Russia. Since 2022, Sino-Russian trade has surged to record levels (Globe Magazine, March 4). Economic alignment is reinforced by increasingly routine military cooperation, including joint bomber patrols, complex naval drills near Japan, and coordinated messaging on Western "containment" (China Brief, June 7; MSN/Newsweek, August 6; Eurasia Daily Monitor [EDM], September 18).

The DPRK and its relations with Russia add to this dynamic. The June 2024 Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang included mutual-assistance provisions that created a legal framework for military and logistical cooperation (U.S. Congress, June 13). Open-source imagery, U.S. declassifications, and Ukrainian forensic reports have since documented the transfer and battlefield use of North Korean short-range ballistic missiles and artillery shells in Ukraine (Reuters, April 24). South Korean officials also state that troops the DPRK dispatched to the Kursk theater marched in Pyongyang's October parade (EDM, May 27; NYT, October 11).

For Beijing, Russia–DPRK relations yield asymmetric advantages. Military and trade cooperation stretches U.S. and allied resources, complicates sanctions enforcement, and ties both Moscow and Pyongyang closer to the PRC, without requiring Beijing to arm Russia overtly. This alignment gives the PRC flexibility to profit from the triangle while keeping its hands clean.

This logic extends to the Korean Peninsula's maritime front. During the November APEC summit, President Trump announced that the United States will arm South Korea with a nuclear submarine (Politico, October 29). While Washington assists an ally's move toward nuclear propulsion, it demands that the PRC pressure a client state to disarm. The contradiction provides diplomatic cover for Beijing's silence, allowing it to portray restraint as principle rather than policy choice.

Sanctions fatigue has not diminished the networks beneath this alignment. Western pressure on Chinese banks, and Moscow's exclusion from SWIFT, have instead prompted adaptation. The renminbi (RMB) has overtaken the U.S. dollar as Russia's dominant foreign currency, and RMB–ruble settlements now make up the bulk of bilateral trade (Reuters, July 24; Guancha, November 5).

Russian banks increasingly rely on domestic

systems to offset Chinese payments, insulating both sides from direct scrutiny. Regulators in Moscow have promoted gold, digital currencies, and closed-loop barter systems as secondary hedges (Reuters, July 8). These workarounds create a semi-formal gray zone through which trade continues with plausible deniability. **[1]** In effect, these financial and logistical practices allow North Korean commerce to continue under the cover of broader Sino-Russian trade. They also nurture Russian dependence on the RMB and give the PRC a stabilizing hand over DPRK activity. The PRC's financial infrastructure, Russia's resource flows, and the DPRK's sanctioned economy as a result now function as a mutually reinforcing ecosystem designed to withstand external pressure.

The Triangle is Self-Sustaining

Critics of the alignment argue that it rests on conflicting interests, personal mistrust, and uneven power. But three structural realities suggest that the system can be self-sustaining despite historical antagonism and suspicions of transactional convergence.

First, in Leninist political systems, policy endurance arises from bureaucratic embedding. Once a tifa—such as "governance exchanges between socialist parties"—is standardized, it spreads across ministries, embassies, and state media. Repetition creates orthodoxy. Moving past "denuclearization" rhetoric will bolster ongoing tourism, trade, and cooperative initiatives.

Second, with the United Nations Panel of Experts dissolved and Moscow having declared denuclearization a "closed issue," incentives for policy reversal have disappeared. Embracing the old language would alienate both partners and produce no material gain. The cost of speaking now outweighs the cost of omission.

Third, sunk costs reinforce cooperation. The infrastructure of RMB–ruble settlements, border logistics, and the DPRK–Russia arms pipeline is expensive to build and complex to unwind. It forms an ecosystem of dependency. Compliance shocks, such as Chinese banks temporarily freezing transactions to avoid secondary sanctions, reflect only friction within the network, not its unraveling. These pauses are safety responses in a system built to bend under pressure rather than break. What analysts often mistake for fragility is in fact the noise of adaptation.

Still, tensions persist. Beijing and Moscow continue to negotiate pricing for the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, Central Asia remains an area of competition, and Beijing's financial institutions remain wary of excessive exposure to sanctioned networks. Yet these are bargaining problems within a shared project, not precursors to rupture.

Some observers remain skeptical. Andrew Kim, former chief of the CIA's Korea Mission Center, dismissed the alignment as a "marriage of convenience," predicting that Kim will eventually pivot back to Washington "when leverage permits" (YouTube/World Knowledge Forum, October 2). Yet this view overlooks how repetition institutionalizes behavior. Diplomacy and interdependence consolidate relations. Even irritations can be managed within that framework, especially as "governance exchanges" introduce symbolic fraternity as a replacement for denuclearization.

The triangular dynamic is neither a formal alliance nor a fleeting convenience. Each actor has incentives to maintain the relationship: for Moscow, diversification from Western dependence; for Pyongyang, regime survival; for Beijing, a buffer that drains U.S. focus and resources. Overall, these forces produce what might be called "consolidated resilience."

The term "axis" may be analytically loaded, yet the structure behaves like one. It is ideologically aligned, materially linked, and strategically convergent.

Conclusion

The notion that the PRC's relationship with North Korea—and by extension the PRC–DPRK–Russia triangle—is inherently fragile, is no longer backed by evidence. The pivot away from "denuclearization" is deliberate. Beijing's omission from its highest-level diplomatic texts was a policy decision ratified by repetition across the president, the premier, and the foreign minister, and then confirmed in November at APEC.

This shift was overlooked by many because it was built not through high-profile summits, but through more resilient mechanisms. Party-to-Party governance exchanges replaced transactional diplomacy. Provincial corridor projects and cross-border "Friendship Year" agreements reshaped the frontier. And a sanctions-era payments network now insulates trade from Western scrutiny. Together these layers form a sanctions-hardened system that supports each participant.

Frictions persist, but they are the ordinary frictions of coordination within a consolidated bloc. Despite bargaining over pipeline pricing and influence in Central Asia or Pyongyang's unpredictable missile tests, each participant has structural incentives to maintain the arrangement. The relationship supports strategic depth for Moscow, regime insurance for Pyongyang, and leverage for Beijing against Western pressure.

The lexicon tells the story. In Beijing's official discourse, "solidarity" (团结) now occupies the rhetorical space once held by "denuclearization." Words in PRC diplomacy do not drift; they settle through repetition into doctrine. When a word disappears repeatedly across top-level texts, it signals more than stylistic preference—it signals a strategic choice. By normalizing silence on denuclearization, Beijing has normalized the reality behind it. A nuclear North Korea supports the foundation of a broader Sino-Russian partnership. The world must learn to read that silence as a statement of intent.

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Notes

[1] Legal analysts have termed behavior intended to avoid overt sanctions violations while maintaining essential flows "adaptive compliance" (适度合规) (King & Wood Mallesons, 2022).

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click here.

Public art celebrating the achievements of Fang Binxing (方滨兴), known as the "father of the Great Firewall" in the Shenzhen Talent Park. (Source: © Wargaz / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Internet Censorship Tools Exported Along Belt and Road

Athena Tong and Yu-Ting Cai
December 5, 2025

Executive Summary

- Over 600-gigabytes of leaked documents illuminate the connections between the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Mesa Laboratory and the firm Geedge Networks. The documents show implementation of Geedge's technology outside of the PRC, including in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Kazakhstan.
- Technology transfers follow the Digital Silk Road and occur between the PRC and One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative partners. This follows the PRC's stated goals of enhancing digital infrastructure and data governance cooperation with OBOR countries.
- Leaked data shows that Geedge does not exclusively utilize proprietary code, instead using existing commercial software development kits (SDKs) and open-source components. This could potentially raise legal concerns among developers.

In mid-November, the artificial intelligence (AI) firm Anthropic disclosed the first publicly documented case of a near end-to-end espionage operation orchestrated through a commercial AI coding assistant. The company claimed that a state-linked actor in the People's Republic of China (PRC) had weaponized its Claude Code tool to automate elements of a cyber-espionage campaign targeting dozens of governments, defense firms, and technology companies worldwide (Anthropic, November 14). The attackers used the large language model to script malware, generate spear-phishing lures, and optimize software infrastructure. U.S. lawmakers responded by summoning Anthropic's CEO to testify on AI-enabled cyber threats (Cyberscoop, November 26).

The model of state-linked commercial actors supporting the PRC's hitherto unique approach to Internet governance is now moving overseas. A tranche of documents leaked in September 2025 show that Beijing is systematically equipping foreign governments to replicate and innovate its authoritarian Internet governance model. The materials, consisting of source code, field-test reports, project management software tickets, and internal briefings, reveal how Beijing's Great Firewall is being packaged and exported as turnkey infrastructure to One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and Digital Silk Road partner countries. **[1]**

The 600-gigabyte tranche is the largest leak to date of internal documents relating to the Great Firewall (Great Firewall Report, September 12). It exposes the relationship between the PRC firm Geedge Networks (积至信息) and MESA Laboratory, which is under the Chinese Academy of Science's Institute of Information Engineering. **[2]** Earlier research, such as analysis of files leaked from the Shanghai-based hacking contractor iS00n, focused on how the PRC monitors and penetrates its partners' networks (China Brief, March 29, 2024, December 20, 2024). This latest dump provides insight on how partner countries seek to acquire and adapt Beijing's repressive apparatus for themselves. **[3]**

From Domestic Firewall to Exportable Product

The Geedge and MESA documents show that the PRC's system for domestic Internet control has been broken down into exportable components that are being sold as commercial products. At its core is the Tiangou Secure Gateway, a device that can be installed at major telecom operators to scan, filter, or block almost all Internet traffic in a country. On top of this, software modules known as Cyber Narrator and TSG Galaxy enable security agencies to run queries regarding virtual private network (VPN) users, and issue new blocking or monitoring rules based on those results.

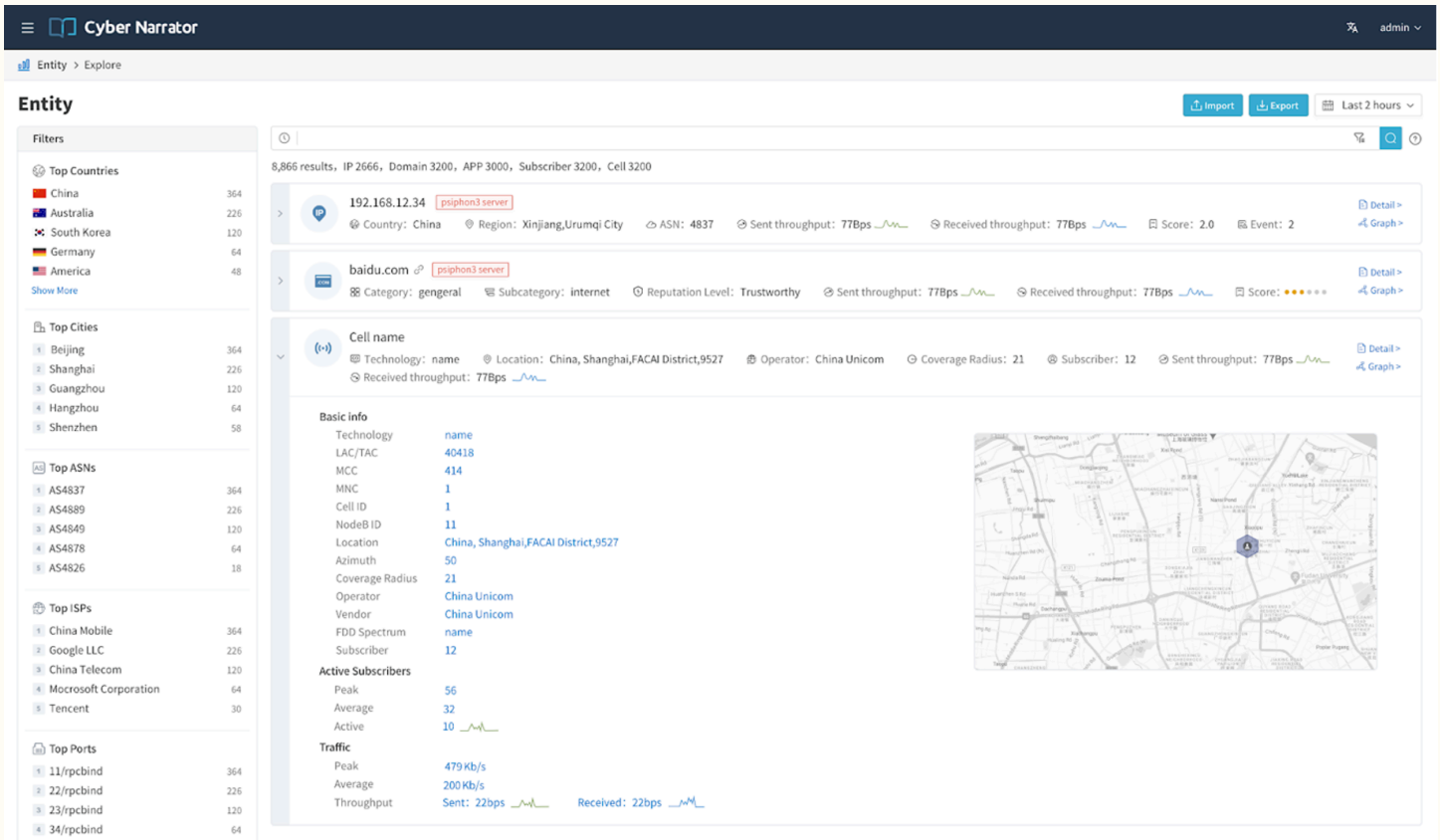
Geedge has launched pilots and deployments abroad in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Kazakhstan, as well as in PRC regions and provinces such as Xinjiang and Fujian. The company's international clients have long records of surveillance and censorship; what the leaked documents show is that PRC technology is now being used to enhance their capabilities (InterSecLab, September 9). Once a government adopts the platform, new features can be rolled out through software updates, allowing foreign clients to "inherit" capabilities first tested and finetuned inside the PRC.

Exporting the logic of the PRC's Great Firewall has normative consequences. When governments in Myanmar or Ethiopia adopt Geedge's stack, they are not just acquiring a product; they are aligning their concept of "normal" Internet governance with that of Beijing. A key part of that concept is deep packet

inspection (DPI). DPI is a technology that allows operators to examine data packets and see which websites or IP addresses users are connecting to, as well as analyze the content and patterns of their traffic in real time. It allows authorities to identify specific applications (such as VPNs, Tor or messaging apps), monitor who is using them and, if desired, block or degrade those connections. It is a key censorship technology that, in the PRC, is associated with privacy infringement (Yang, 2015; Li, March 3; ChinaFile, accessed December 4). **[4]** For Beijing, DPIs are deployed as routine infrastructure and behavior-based blocking is a standard security function. Geedge is public about its desire to market its products internationally. At an event in January 2024 in Hainan, co-founder Fang Binxing (方滨兴) described the company's vision as "expanding into international markets, promoting Chinese solutions to the world, and promoting Chinese technologies globally" (辐射国际市场，把中国的方案推向世界，把中国的技术推向世界). Fang, who is often referred to as the "father of the Great Firewall" (中国防火墙之父), explicitly identified countries participating in the OBOR initiative as a key priority for this global push (Sohu, January 11, 2024).

Job advertisements posted by the company also provide evidence of the company's international expansion. These show the that Geedge is seeking candidates "able to speak English or another foreign language with working proficiency" (可以使用英语或者其他外语作为工作语言) and willing to undertake three- to six-month assignments in countries such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Bahrain, Algeria, and India, several of which are key OBOR corridors (Zhipin, August 22; The Globe and Mail, September 8).

Figure 1: Cyber Narrator Dashboard



(Source: Cyber Narrator/TSG Galaxy)

Geedge Provides Capabilities, Clients Set Censorship Parameters

A striking feature exposed by the leak is the degree of operational control delegated to foreign government clients. Rather than forcing foreign operators to rely entirely on Geedge engineers for rule updates and block lists, the company provides a client-side interface, sometimes referred to as "AppSketch Works." Internal documents describe it as a management application through which local staff can define and maintain curated sets of VPNs and circumvention tools to be whitelisted or blocked. [5] This interface layer lowers the technical threshold for sophisticated censorship while the underlying DPI system remains proprietary and centrally updated by Geedge remotely from the PRC.

Geedge also maintains a shared, cross-border database of VPN, proxy, and bridge nodes compiled from all deployments of its products around the world. This allows a circumvention endpoint exposed in one country to be added to block lists elsewhere almost immediately, effectively turning each customer into both a consumer and a contributor to a global censorship threat-intelligence pool centered on PRC-developed infrastructure (InterSecLab, September 9).

Table 1: Sample of City Codes Identified Based on M22 Myanmar's Network Planning Document

City Code	Full Name
YGN	Yangon
NPT	Naypyidaw
MDY	Mandalay
THL	Tachilek
MUSE	Muse
MWD	Myawaddy

(Source: Author research from Geedge database)

Geedge's products do not rely exclusively on proprietary code. They often use existing commercial software development kits (SDKs) and open-source components, including well-known traffic analysis and visualization tools. In many cases, these libraries appear to be repurposed for mass surveillance, censorship, and data exploitation rather than their intended analytic functions. This lowers development costs and accelerates feature updates. But it also raises legal and ethical concerns. Upstream vendors and maintainers may not be aware that their work is being embedded in repressive systems, and it is unlikely that they would support such use cases. No attempts have been made, however, to anticipate or prevent the use of these tools for repressive ends.

Digital Silk Road Cooperation Part of Beijing's Strategic Planning

In strategic policy documents, Beijing frames the export of its Internet governance system as part of its national strategy. Since the 14th Five-Year Plan period, the PRC has tied digital infrastructure, cyber security, and data governance to its ultimate goal of "national rejuvenation" (伟大复兴), calling for "digital sovereignty" (数字中国), and the need to become a "network great power" (网络强国) (PRC State Council, December 28, 2021). Early commentary on the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan emphasizes both self-reliance in core technologies and deeper technological cooperation with OBOR partners (PRC State Council, October 28; China Brief, November 3). The recommendations for

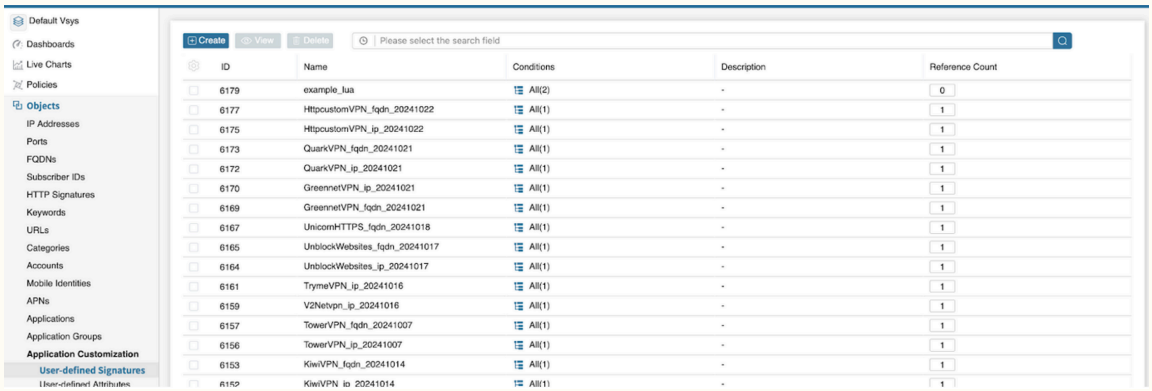
the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plans and the "High-Quality Belt and Road Cooperation: Partnership on Connectivity" document issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) identify digital infrastructure, data governance, and "network security" as priority areas for cooperation and OBOR engagement (MFA, October 17, 2023).

These documents formalize and promote partnerships for the co-development of standards and platforms to strengthen network sovereignty and manage cross-border data flows. Within this framework, the Geedge–MESA systems deployed in Myanmar, Pakistan, and other OBOR states operationalize the vision of the Digital Silk Road by embedding PRC-developed surveillance and censorship capabilities into the core infrastructure of partner countries.

On-the-Ground Reception and Reactions

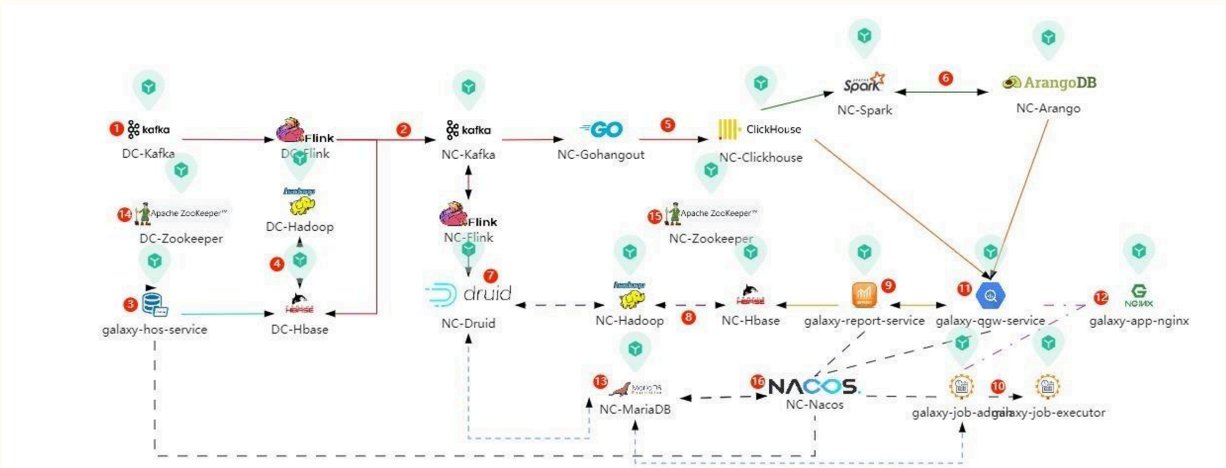
Local reporting reveals unease regarding the implementation of these systems. In Myanmar, work by the covert activist group Justice For Myanmar and the U.K.-based investigative journalism organization Finance Uncovered have reported sharp criticism from civil society over the use of Chinese-built censorship platforms, including Tiangou Secure Gateway, by the post-coup military junta (Finance Uncovered, May 21; Justice For Myanmar, September 9). This technology enables authorities to directly target activists, journalists, and dissidents. Although there is as yet no direct evidence that Geedge's technology has been used for these purposes, the growing

Figure 2: Screenshot of Appsketch



(Source: AppSketch)

Figure 3: Flowchart of Technology Implementation



(Source: Geedge leak)

capacity to do so signals risks for personal safety and the closure of civic space. In Pakistan, a censorship and traffic surveillance platform has been installed at key Internet and telecommunications chokepoints since 2023. Known as Web Monitoring System 2.0 (WMS 2.0), it is based on Geedge technology and enables authorities to block content and monitor user behavior in near-real time. It is currently moving toward a centrally managed, scalable "national firewall" that is comparable in both architecture and effect to the PRC's Great Firewall. Human rights defenders, journalists, and civil society organizations within Pakistan and elsewhere have voiced concern over the system's lack of meaningful safeguards against overreach or abuse, and its capacity to defeat core anonymity tools (Amnesty International, September 9).

Conclusion

The Geedge and MESA materials shed a partial light on how the PRC's censorship-as-a-service model is marketed and deployed overseas.

While the technical documentation is substantial, however, the leak contains limited information on pricing, contractual terms, making the exact mechanics of its commercial operations unclear. The leak also does not contain evidence of explicit state directives. Although Geedge is closely coupled to the MESA Lab under CAS, with which it shares research outputs and whose code bases point to joint development of core algorithms, the lack of direct state involvement reinforces the ambiguity of Geedge's status as a "private" vendor. The line between state research and commercialization thus appears largely bureaucratic, not functional. This pattern echoes the relationship revealed in the iS00n disclosures, where a nominally private cybersecurity contractor conducted offensive operations against foreign telecoms, ministries, and financial institutions on behalf of PRC public security and intelligence clients.

Geedge's implicit sanction by the state, through its work with government-run entities, puts its work on a continuum in the PRC's digital

Table 2: Open-Source and Commercial Tools Used by Geedge

Technology	Category
Apache Ecosystem (Kafka, Flink, Spark), Gohangout	Big Data and Stream Processing
ClickHouse, ArangoDB, Redis, MariaDB, MySQL	Database
Docker, Kubernetes	Container
ZooKeeper	Coordination & Configuration
Prometheus, Grafana	Monitoring & Observability

strategy. This continuum runs from AI-enabled offensive operations as highlighted in the Anthropic report to the active shaping of international technical and legal norms of information control through the export of commercial digital censorship tools. The goal throughout is to further consolidate Beijing's global power and influence.

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Notes

[1] Note that the "Great Firewall" is an umbrella term for a series of Internet censorship systems (see Great Firewall Report, accessed December 3).

[2] MESA stands for Massive Effective Stream Analysis.

[3] Beijing is also externalizing its governance model in domains beyond cyber, such as public security and police work (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 13).

[4] Feng Yang. "The tale of deep packet inspection in China: Mind the gap." 2015 3rd International Conference on Information and Communication Technology (ICoICT). Nusa Dua, Bali, Indonesia, 2015, p. 348-351; Li Li. "Advancing Obfuscation Strategies to Counter China's Great Firewall: A Technical and Policy Perspective." arXiv, 2025, arXiv:2503.02018v1.

[5] These include a set of over 30 VPN tools with detailed blocking strategies (~yinjiangyi/VPN封堵需求.html), a VPN whitelist feature introduction (Galaxy Release 21.12 (21 Dec 2021).html), and a VPN whitelist recommendation program (OLAP 22.02 Upgrade Notes.html)

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click here.

Beijing Dance Academy performances highlighted at the June 2025 China National Arts Fund exhibition in Shenyang, a Party-backed event guided by Xi Jinping Thought and promoting Party-aligned artistic development. (Source: China National Arts Fund)

Beijing Dance Academy Dances to the Tune of Zhongnanhai

Frank Tian Xie
December 5, 2025

Executive Summary

- The Beijing Dance Academy (BDA), China's leading dance institution, operates as a state-owned entity deeply entwined with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), receiving significant funding from the Chinese government and being governed by a Party-dominated leadership—details that are downplayed or omitted in its English-language materials.
- BDA's curriculum and international exchange programs mandate political education and loyalty to CCP ideology, raising concerns about academic autonomy and the integrity of global partnerships.
- The Academy's CCP ties and politicization creates risks for foreign institutions, who may unknowingly partner with a vector for Chinese state propaganda and CCP influence, rather than a perceived neutral cultural entity.

Recent action by U.S. lawmakers targeting programs like the China Scholarship Council underline mounting concerns that institutional academic ties may serve as vectors for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence rather than genuine exchanges (AP, July 9).

The Beijing Dance Academy (BDA; 北京舞蹈学院), established in 1954, is the premier institution for dance education in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is renowned for its rigorous training in classical Chinese dance, ballet, and modern choreography (BDA, accessed November 3). With over 500 faculty members and approximately 2,000 students, BDA has cultivated a global reputation, forging partnerships with institutions in the United States, Europe, Taiwan, and beyond.

BDA's performances tend to present an image of cultural excellence. Beneath this artistic façade, however, lies a deep entanglement with the CCP, which shapes BDA's governance, curriculum, and international engagements. As the BDA has become increasingly politicized, its role as a state-owned institution has advanced the CCP's ideological agenda. Overseas partner institutions are likely unaware of the extent of BDA's government funding, Party-dominated leadership, mandatory political education, and the stringent political criteria it maintains in its international exchange programs. But its Chinese-language website makes its role in advancing the Party line unambiguous. BDA's latest production is a restaging of "Railway Guerrillas" (铁道游击队), which it describes as a "classic ethnic dance drama" (经典民族舞剧); and an article from early December discusses faculty taking a political education class on the CCP Central Committee's recent fourth plenum in which their work was praised for "serving the country through dance" (以舞报国), including through international exchanges (BDA, December 1, December 3).

Institutional Ties to the Chinese Communist Party

The BDA operates as a state-owned institution under the direct oversight of the PRC government, and its party committee wields significant influence over its operations. The Academy receives substantial funding from the government, operating under the education committee of the Beijing Municipal government (BDA, December 2017 [archived version]; BDA, December 19, 2018). According to a published budget, the academy received at least Renminbi (RMB) 28 million ($3.9 million) in 2023 from government funds. This comprised over 45 percent of the organization's total budget (BDA, March 9, 2023).

In the past two years alone, BDA has received at least three major institutional project grants from the state-run China National Arts Fund (CNAF; 中国国家艺术基金). Publicly available funding requests for such projects typically range from RMB 100,000–4,000,000 ($14,000–$556,000), depending on scope and category (General Administration of Sport of China, March 21, 2023; CNAF, June 24; China Performing Arts Ticketing, accessed July 27). According to its 2022 Graduate Education Quality Report, at least four faculty members from BDA serve as national-level reviewers for state grant bodies such as the CNAF (BDA, April 2022 [archived version], June 8, 2022). This financial dependence ensures BDA's operations and academic direction align with CCP priorities and state directives.

The CCP's grip on BDA is also clear in the composition of the organization's leadership. According to a November 2024 analysis of its Chinese-language website, 10 out of the 11 members of BDA's leadership team were CCP members, holding dual roles as academic administrators and Party officials. **[1]** After a leadership rotation in January 2025, the

leadership team now comprises eight individuals, of which seven are CCP members. This includes the Academy's president, vice presidents, and deans, who are tasked with both educational leadership and advancing Party ideology (BDA, November 3).

The current party secretary is Liu Lan (刘岚). A CCP member of over 30 years (since 1994), Liu has held several senior political roles within BDA, including as deputy party secretary, head of the BDA Party Committee's Organization and Propaganda Department, and director of the United Front Work Department of BDA's Party School. All these positions entail responsibility for managing loyalty and alignment with Party priorities (BDA, January 13, 2015). Notably, she does not appear to have any background in the arts, as her biographies cite degrees in law and economics. As the new party secretary, her role at BDA involves overseeing the Party Committee's activities, including the enforcement of political education and the approval of major institutional decisions. The school's new president is Xu Rui (许锐), himself deputy secretary of the party committee (BDA, November 3).

Discrepancies between BDA's English- and Chinese-language websites further reveal its political alignment. The English site portrays BDA as a purely academic and cultural entity, emphasizing artistic achievements and international collaborations. In contrast, the Chinese site details the Party Committee's authority, highlighting its role in organizing study sessions on Xi Jinping Thought and Party history (BDA, September 28, 2021; BDA, June 30, 2023 [archived version]). The academy's Chinese website also lists the Party Committee's United Front Work Department and its Propaganda Department among key departments (BDA, [accessed February 1]). As of November 2024, its English language-website, by contrast, omitted mention of four out of the 11 members of the school leadership, including those in charge of the above two areas so central to the Party's authoritarian grip and foreign influence activities (BDA, accessed July 20). Seven out of the eight members of the current leadership are listed in English. The omitted individual is Xiao Xiangrong (肖向荣), a member of the Standing Committee of the Party Committee and Vice President of the academy. This dual messaging suggests an intentional effort to obscure the CCP presence at the institution from international audiences, portraying BDA as a neutral cultural institution while embedding Party oversight in its core operations.

Political Education in the Curriculum

BDA's curriculum is infused with mandatory political education, requiring all students to complete courses on CCP history and ideology (BDA, January 2022). Administered by the Party Committee, these classes cover the history of the Communist Revolution, Marxism-Leninism, and the policies of Xi Jinping's leadership. According to internal guidelines, these courses are core graduation requirements, ensuring every student is steeped in Party doctrine. Beyond classroom study, students participate in activities, including essay contests and performances, that celebrate CCP milestones, such as the Party's centennial in 2021. These activities often require students to create works that reflect "socialist values" (社会主义价值观) and national pride, aligning artistic expression with state propaganda. At special activities like the 70th Anniversary BDA Dance Forum, then-Party Secretary Ba Tu (巴图) highlighted that "Beijing Dance Academy must be guided by Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (京舞蹈学院要以习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想为指引) (China Writers Association Net, October 24, 2024).

This integration of ideological training into an artistic institution raises concerns about

academic freedom and autonomy. While BDA trains students in dance disciplines, the mandatory political component suggests that creative freedom and expression is subordinate to Party objectives. This mirrors broader trends in higher education in the PRC, where state-owned universities prioritize ideological conformity, often at the expense of independent thinking and critical inquiry. For BDA students, the pressure to conform ideologically may shape not only their education but also their future careers, as loyalty to the Party becomes a prerequisite for professional development and job opportunities.

Political Loyalty in International Exchange Programs

BDA's international exchange programs, a key pillar of its global outreach, are heavily politicized, with explicit requirements for political loyalty. Announcements on BDA's Chinese-language website for partnerships with institutions like the State University of New York (SUNY) at Purchase outline stringent applicant criteria. A May 2024 announcement states that candidates must "love the motherland and socialism, have good political and professional qualities, be physically and mentally healthy, and have no record of violating laws and disciplines" (热爱祖国、热爱社会主义，具有良好的政治和专业素质，身心健康，无违法违纪记录) (BDA, May 22, 2024). Identical requirements appear in announcements for exchanges with institutions in Austria, Poland, and Taiwan, indicating a standardized policy (Beijing Dance Academy International, October 8, 2023, November 15, 2023, May 24, 2024).

The selection process further embeds CCP oversight. Applicants must be recommended by the Party Committee of their faculty or department, and the Party branch must provide a written evaluation of the candidate's "ideology" (思想) assessing their alignment with CCP values. These requirements ensure that only politically reliable individuals represent BDA abroad, effectively turning exchange students into informal ambassadors of Party ideology. The English-language versions of these announcements omit such criteria, framing exchanges as purely cultural and academic, which suggests a deliberate effort to conceal the CCP's influence from international partners.

Implications for Global Partnerships

BDA's politicized framework poses significant risks for its international partners, who may be unaware of the extent of CCP influence. Institutions like SUNY Purchase, as well others that engage with BDA, do so under the assumption of mutual artistic collaboration. But political loyalty requirements and Party oversight raise concerns about the integrity of these partnerships. Foreign students and faculty participating in BDA programs may be exposed to ideological training, while BDA students abroad may promote CCP narratives, including distortions and falsehoods about contemporary China or Chinese history. This aligns with the CCP's broader strategy of using cultural institutions to enhance global influence, as seen in initiatives like the Confucius Institutes, which have faced scrutiny for their political activities and negative impact on academic freedom (National Association of Scholars, April 5, 2017).

BDA's exchange programs could be leveraged to limit opportunities for competitors like Shen Yun to perform. For over a decade, Shen Yun successfully performed at SUNY Purchase's Performing Arts Center in New York. In September 2024, however, following SUNY's signing of a student exchange agreement with BDA earlier that year, the theater canceled a contract for Shen Yun's 2025 season. **[2]** This was done in part because the student exchange agreement contained political selection criteria. This cancellation raises concerns that BDA's

partnerships may be used to exert pressure on foreign institutions to suppress performances critical of the CCP, thereby extending its domestic censorship criteria into global cultural spaces.

Conclusion

The Beijing Dance Academy exemplifies the CCP's ability to weave political control into cultural institutions. With substantial government funding, a leadership team dominated by CCP members, mandatory political education, and ideological requirements for international exchanges, BDA serves as both a premier dance academy and a vehicle for Party propaganda. The leadership of figures like Party Secretary Liu Lan ensures that the Academy aligns with CCP priorities, while discrepancies between its English and Chinese websites obscure this reality from global audiences. As the CCP continues to leverage its cultural institutions for political ends, a critical understanding of organizations like BDA is essential to preserving the integrity of global academic and artistic exchange.

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Notes

[1] The initial analysis was published in November 2024 by the Falun Dafa Information Center (FDIC) based on information on BDA's website; the author reviewed the original documents and verified the accuracy of this count, then conducted an updated analysis after the leadership rotation of January 2025. https://faluninfo.net/beijing-dance-academy-a-chinese-state-owned-art-institute-closely-intertwined-with-the-chinese-communist-party/.

[2] Author's interview with a representative of Shen Yun's hosting organization for SUNY Purchase, July 2025.

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Lin Xiangyang at the 2020 U.S.–China Disaster Management Exchange.
(Source: United States Army)

Leadership Turmoil Impacts Eastern Theater Command Readiness

Zi Yang
November 25, 2025

Executive Summary

- The Eastern Theater Command leadership has been hollowed out. Its commander has been purged and its political commissar has disappeared, leaving the People's Liberation Army's most strategically important theater command effectively leaderless.
- The absence of top Eastern Theater Command leaders and uncertainty surrounding potential acting commanders weaken the theater command's Party committee and undermine its ability to prepare for conflict.
- Despite rising tensions with Japan, the Eastern Theater Command's compromised leadership structure likely constrains Beijing's readiness and willingness to engage in high-risk military actions.

Tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan have risen dramatically after Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks on how Japan might react to an attack on Taiwan. Responding to a question at a budget committee meeting on November 7, Takaichi said that a Taiwan contingency involving the use of force could constitute an "existential risk" for Japan (Nikkei, November 7). **[1]** This comment was met with threats from online PRC commentators. Most notably, the PRC's consul general in Osaka, Xue Jian (薛剑), inflamed the situation by posting on the social media platform X to say that "the dirty neck that sticks itself in must be cut off" (UDN, November 10). **[2]**

The PRC government subsequently discouraged its citizens from visiting Japan and deployed People's Liberation Army (PLA) ships to waters south of Japan's Kyushu Island (South China Morning Post [SCMP], November 14). The PLA's theater commands have also mobilized, producing bellicose videos with the goal of intimidation (Sina, November 19).

The PRC's aggressive rhetoric raises questions about the readiness of the PLA Eastern Theater Command (TC), given its strategic focus on both Japan and Taiwan. Recent purges have impacted its leadership, however, to the detriment of command stability. This suggests military escalation is unlikely in the near future.

The TC Leadership Structure

In the PLA, "the Party commands the gun" (党指挥枪). Each PLA theater command operates under its own Party committee, and every unit is led jointly by a military commander and a political commissar (Lianhe Zaobao, July 6, 2023). Within each TC party committee, the political commissar represents the interests of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and serves as the committee's chair. The commander, meanwhile, serves as the deputy chair. The rest of the committee includes a chief of staff, deputy political commissars, and deputy commanders who usually also serve as commanders and commissars of the TC Army, Navy, Air Force, and possibly the Rocket Force. **[3]** Decisions made at committee meetings guide the TC as a whole.

In wartime, the committee functions as a war council. It executes orders from the Central Military Commission (CMC) and directs joint operations across the services, except the Rocket Force, which remains under direct CMC control (960th Cyberspace Wing, October 14, 2021). **[4]**

Eastern TC Missing Top Officials

Military operations are not only contests between equipment but also competitions of leadership quality. The PLA currently fields the most advanced military hardware in its history. But the quality and stability of its leadership remain dubious.

An ongoing purge of the PLA high command has exacerbated these challenges. On October 17, the Party announced the expulsion of nine generals and admirals, including the Eastern TC's commander Lin Xiangyang (林向阳) (China Brief Notes, October 17). At the subsequent fourth plenary of the 20th CCP Central Committee, an additional 18 members with backgrounds in the armed forces failed to attend, including Eastern TC Political Commissar Liu Qingsong (刘青松). This unprecedented number of absences has fueled speculation about the full extent of the purge.

Lin Xiangyang was a career Army officer, serving as the commander of the Central TC before becoming the Eastern TC commander in 2022. He was once seen as a rising star from the 31st Group Army, a unit closely associated with Xi (CNA, October 24). The reason for his expulsion from the Party and the PLA is unclear. Official statements point to "serious violations

of Party discipline" (严重违反党的纪律) as well as corruption charges (Xinhua, October 17). Still, others suspect that factional conflicts played a role (The Diplomat, October 21; China Brief, November 14).

Liu Qingsong (刘青松), a PLA Navy admiral, is yet to be purged, but is likely involved with ongoing investigations into his links with Lin Xiangyang. This would explain his absence from the fourth plenum—an event where attendance is mandatory. It would also account for his public disappearance since early October (BBC, November 7).

With Lin and Liu out of action, the Eastern TC, which is the PLA's frontline force for operations in the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait, currently has no official commander or political commissar in place. Based on standard succession practices within the PLA, the Eastern TC's acting commander is likely one of Lin Xiangyang's four deputy commanders:

- Hong Jiangqiang (洪江强), Eastern TC Chief of Staff;
- Kong Jun (孔军), head of the Eastern TC Army and ex-commander of the PLA Marine Corps;
- Wang Zhongcai (王仲才), Eastern TC Navy commander and former head of the China Coast Guard; or
- Wu Junbao (吴俊宝), commander of the Eastern TC Air Force.

It is not known who among these four is currently serving as acting commander, but Hong's close personal ties with Lin might put him at risk of investigation.

The three Eastern TC deputy political commissars—Tang Xinghua (唐兴华), Mei Wen (梅文), Zhong Weiguo (钟卫国)—concurrently serve as the political commissars of the TC Army, Navy, and Air Force, respectively. It is also difficult to determine who might be shouldering Liu Qingsong's responsibilities, and it is not known if they have been implicated in the Lin Xiangyang case. While the full scope of the purge within the Eastern TC remains opaque, such investigations seldom stop with a single individual. More purges are likely to follow in the coming months.

Conclusion

The Eastern TC's leadership has been seriously disrupted by the ongoing PLA purge. The TC formally lacks a commander and its political commissar has vanished. It is unclear who is acting in either role, and the Eastern TC Party Committee is hollowed out. Restoring leadership competence will take time. Given this turbulence, the TC Party Committee is likely functioning at substandard capacity, with remaining leaders lacking substantial experience leading a TC. They also are likely working under acute anxiety due to the ongoing purge of their colleagues.

This level of senior command instability inevitably erodes readiness, disrupts decision-making, and damages cohesion and morale among officers. As tensions rise between the PRC and Japan, concern over a possible military conflict also grows. But the Eastern TC's destabilized leadership likely constrains the PRC's ability and willingness to escalate, providing a glimmer of hope that the latest tensions will remain below the threshold of war.

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Notes

[1] In the original Japanese, Takaichi said, “武力行使伴うなら存立危機事態なり得る.”

[2] In the original Japanese, Xue Jian wrote, “勝手に突っ込んできたその汚い首は一瞬の躊躇もなく斬ってやるしかない.”

[3] The TC Party Committee also controls core TC organizations, including the Joint Staff Department (战区联合参谋部), Political Work Department (战区政治工作部), Political and Legal Affairs Commission (战区政法委), and the Joint Operations Command Center (战区联合作战指挥中心).

[4] Under conditions of war, the TC commander might hold greater sway at TC Party Committee meetings and have greater operational discretion. But ultimate authority remains with the TC political commissar, whose primary task is to ensure that the TC commander does not betray the Party in any way.

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CCG vessel en route to the northern Pacific in November 2025.
(Source: taiwanreports.com)

China Coast Guard Increasingly Assertive

Ying Yu Lin and Tzu-Hao Liao
December 4, 2025

Executive Summary

- The China Coast Guard (CCG) has adopted more assertive and complex operational patterns near Kinmen, shifting from single-file incursions to multi-axis converging formations coordinated with PLA joint air–sea patrols. These actions signal a transition from routine harassment to integrated coercive pressure on Taiwan's offshore islands.
- The CCG's dual identity as a law-enforcement body and a paramilitary force have expanded its strategic utility for Beijing. The CCG now plays a central role in operations framed as "maritime jurisdiction enforcement," reinforcing Beijing's political–legal claims over Taiwan under its "one-China principle."

- Beijing's lexical shift from foregrounding discussion of a "blockade" to a "quarantine" scenario suggests a move toward selective maritime controls within the scope of domestic PRC law.
- Beijing's approach raises the risk that the PRC may exploit regional crises—such as tensions with Japan—to intensify pressure on Taiwan under the guise of "law-enforcement" operations.

The China Coast Guard (CCG) led three intensive incursions into waters around the island of Kinmen in November. This marked a sharp escalation in operational assertiveness after a period of relative calm in October. Taiwan's Coast Guard Administration (CGA) reported on November 20 that the 12th Patrol District from its Kinmen–Matsu–Penghu Branch detected a CCG vessel operating with its automatic identification system (AIS) disabled. This usually indicates hostile intent (CGA, November 20). The CGA responded by dispatching patrol ships to intercept the vessels. An hour later, four CCG vessels entered Kinmen waters from two directions, approaching from the southwest of Lieyu Township and the southeast of Liaoluo Bay in column formations. **[1]** The CGA deployed four patrol vessels to prevent the CCG ships from advancing deeper until the ships eventually withdrew.

These incursions reflect a broader shift in CCG tactics around Taiwan. Earlier operations typically employed "single-file" penetrations, but November's actions featured east–west converging formations, testing Taiwan's responsiveness to more complex maneuvers. By leveraging numerical superiority and larger-tonnage hulls, the CCG aims to impose continuous pressure on Taiwan's offshore islands and to create conditions for isolating and encircling these outposts.

From November 19 onward, CCG activity near Taiwan's offshore islands also coincided with PLA joint air–sea combat readiness patrols (Ministry of National Defense [MND], November 20). This synchronization likely indicates an emerging multi-axis harassment pattern. The combination of CCG pressure at close range and PLA maneuvers in the broader battlespace mirrors the PLA's longstanding strategy to "encircle a point and strike reinforcements" (围点打援). This means that the CCG can fix Taiwan's offshore garrisons while PLA units position themselves to deter or interdict potential reinforcements. As such, CCG actions cannot be treated as isolated maritime law enforcement incidents. They are part of a larger, integrated coercive posture.

CCG More Assertive Since 2018 Reforms

A turning point in CCG behavior occurred in 2018, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) formally transferred the CCG to the People's Armed Police (PAP) (People's Daily, June 28, 2018). This was presented as an administrative adjustment but it initiated a comprehensive restructuring that affected personnel training, command culture, and force modernization. Many CCG vessels originally commissioned for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) were transferred to the CCG and refitted for maritime law enforcement. As the PLAN continues to induct new vessels, further transfers are expected, which will strengthen the CCG's capacity.

Although subordinated to the PAP and ultimately the Central Military Commission, the CCG retains the outward identity of a law-enforcement body. This duality affords Beijing considerable operational flexibility. After the Joint Sword 2024-B military exercise, Beijing increasingly relied on the CCG for operations targeting Taiwan (China Brief, November 1, 2024). Framing such actions as law enforcement

activities, Beijing seeks to normalize its claims to Taiwan by pushing a narrative that it is simply dealing with domestic matters under the "one-China principle" (一个中国原则) (MFA, February 2000). These political-legal considerations significantly shape the CCG's expanding operational role.

Shift in Language Emphasizes Legality of Potential Actions

Beijing's evolving discourse regarding potential actions against Taiwan is equally consequential to its strategy (China Brief, November 1, 2024). In 2022–2023, official rhetoric emphasized the possibility of a "blockade" (封锁) of Taiwan, implying that the PLAN would have a central role in comprehensively severing Taiwan's maritime access. By contrast, from 2024 onward, Beijing has increasingly adopted the term "quarantine" (隔离), which entails selective, temporary restrictions on "suspicious" vessels (CSIS, June 5, 2024).

Beijing likely recognizes the difficulty of completely cutting off maritime traffic through the Taiwan Strait. It may instead seek to use the CCG to impose targeted, selective maritime controls, supported by PLAN, PLA Air Force, and PLA Rocket Force assets designed to accelerate a rapid-war scenario. This approach aligns closely with the PRC's legal warfare (法律战) strategy. The PRC's primary objective in conducting legal warfare against Taiwan is to impose enforcement authority and jurisdiction over Taiwan. Through this approach, Beijing seeks to make Taiwanese vessels and citizens subject to control by its own law enforcement bodies. Similar actions can be seen in the PRC's recent threats to issue arrest warrants for Taiwanese individuals via Interpol (Taipei Times, November 10). Regulating shipping with a law enforcement agency under the PAP further reinforces the narrative that Taiwan is a domestic issue of the PRC.

The November pattern raises concerns that the PRC could exploit external crises—such as escalating tensions with Japan in the East China Sea—as cover for heightened pressure on Taiwan. A scenario resembling "feint in the east, strike in the west" (声东击西) cannot be discounted. [2] After all, the underlying catalyst for heightened Sino–Japanese tensions remains closely linked to Taiwan's security and its geo-strategic position in the first island chain.

Conclusion

The CCG's recent behavior suggests that its approach to Taiwan continues to evolve. It employs more complex formations, closer integration with PLA air–sea patrols, and increasingly coordinated political–legal signaling. These developments underscore that the CCG has moved well beyond traditional law-enforcement functions. It now sits at the center of Beijing's calibrated coercive strategy, capable of shaping the battlespace, reinforcing legal narratives, and synchronizing with PLA operations. For Taiwan, understanding the CCG's changing operational patterns is no longer a maritime security issue alone. It is now inseparable from broader cross-strait military planning.

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Notes

[1] The CCG vessels that entered Kinmen waters on November 20 were ships 14515, 14603, 14605, and 14527.

[2] "Feint in the east, strike in the West" is one of the Thirty-Six Stratagems (三十六計), published in the 6th century (ctext, accessed December 2).

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