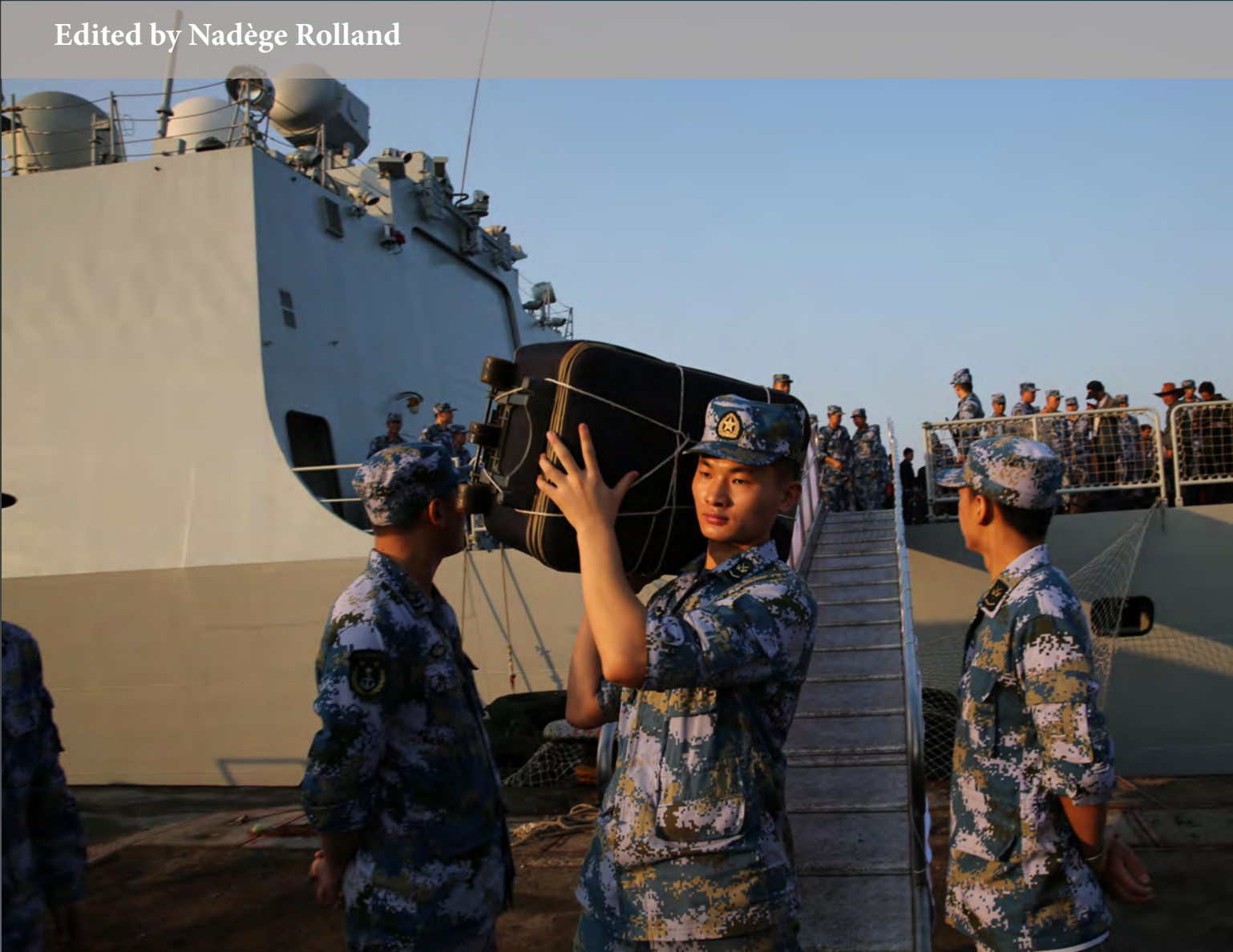


# SECURING THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

*China's Evolving Military Engagement  
Along the Silk Roads*

Edited by Nadège Rolland



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# SECURING THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

*China's Evolving Military Engagement  
Along the Silk Roads*

*Edited by*

Nadège Rolland

*With contributions by*

Alessandro Arduino, Michael S. Chase, Mathieu Duchâtel,  
Kristen Gunness, Raffaello Pantucci, Dirk van der Kley,  
and Guifang (Julia) Xue

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# SECURING THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

## *China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*

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# Securing the Belt and Road: Prospects for Chinese Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads

*Nadège Rolland*

**NADÈGE ROLLAND** is Senior Fellow for Political and Security Affairs at the National Bureau of Asian Research. She is the author of *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (2017). She can be reached at <nrolland@nbr.org>.

On August 1, 2017, the day of its 90th anniversary, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) officially inaugurated its first permanent overseas support facility under the blazing Djiboutian sun. The event indicated a dramatic departure from the previously prevailing claim that China "does not station any troops or set up any military bases in any foreign country" as a matter of policy.<sup>1</sup> It also highlighted the long-term role assigned to the PLA in protecting China's expanding national interests, a role that Hu Jintao had granted the Chinese military back in 2004 as part of its "new historic missions."<sup>2</sup> For the past fifteen years, recognizing that "security risks to China's overseas interests are on the increase,"<sup>3</sup> the PLA has taken on the new challenges created by globally expanding national interests and entanglements, pushing farther away from China's shores, broadening its strategic horizons, and enhancing its power-projection capabilities. The 2015 defense white paper put an unprecedented emphasis on maritime interests and on the PLA's responsibility to protect them as one of its core missions.<sup>4</sup>

Chinese strategic planners generally agree that the "boundaries of China's national security" are defined by the expansion of its overseas interests and that "where national interests expand, the support of the military force has to follow."<sup>5</sup> Since its introduction in late 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been pushing the boundaries of China's national interests well beyond the traditional focus on the country's immediate neighborhood. China's Ministry of National Defense publicly denies that BRI has any military or geostrategic intent.<sup>6</sup> Even if that is truly the case, the priority Beijing has given to BRI for the last six years has created an overall acceleration and geographic expansion of Chinese overseas activities that will inevitably generate the need for some level of state and military protection.

Latin America, Oceania, and Africa have been incorporated within BRI in addition to the 65 Eurasian countries originally included in 2013. "New strategic territories"—defined as the polar regions, the deep sea, cyberspace, and outer space<sup>7</sup>—have also been connected under the BRI umbrella, as illustrated by the creation of a "Silk Road on ice" in the Arctic region, three ocean-based "blue economic passages," the Digital Silk Road, and the Space Information Corridor. BRI's wide geographic scope extends over remote regions where the security situation can be volatile due to political instability, social unrest, and religious extremism,<sup>8</sup> potentially putting at

<sup>1</sup> The claim was notably expressed in China's first white paper on defense published in 1998. See State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's National Defense in 1998* (Beijing, July 1998), <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/5/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> James Mulvenon, "Chairman Hu and the PLA's 'New Historic Missions,'" Hoover Institution, *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 27, January 9, 2009, <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* (Beijing, April 2013), <http://en.people.cn/90786/8209362.html>.

<sup>4</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Zhang Wenmu, *Lun Zhongguo haiquan* [On China's Sea Power] (Beijing: Haiyang, 2014); and Wang Huayong, "Haijun Donghai jia ndui zhengwei Wang Huayong zhong jiang: Jianjue hanwei haiyang quanyi, weilai zhanzheng yongyu liangjian" [Lieutenant General Wang Huayong, Political Commissar of the East China Sea Fleet: Resolutely Defending Sea Rights, Bravely Facing the Future War], *Zhongguo junwang*, March 6, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jwz/2016-03/06/content\\_6944549.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwz/2016-03/06/content_6944549.htm).

<sup>6</sup> "Guofang bu: Zhongguo Yidai Yilu meiyou junshi yitu bu mouqiu shili fanwei" [Ministry of National Defense: China's Belt and Road Has No Military Intentions and Does Not Seek Sphere of Influence], Sina, May 25, 2017, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2017-05-25/doc-ifyfqvmh8893454.shtml>.

<sup>7</sup> Yang Jian and Zheng Yingqin, "'Renlei mingyun gongtongti' sixiang yu xin jiang yu de guoji zhili" [The "Community of Common Destiny" Concept and the New Territories of International Governance], *Guoji wenti yanjiu*, no. 4 (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Li Ziguo, "'Yidai Yilu' mianlin de fengxian yu anquan jizhi 'quehan'" [Risks Faced by the "Belt and Road" and the "Disappointment" of Security Mechanisms], China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), September 8, 2017, [http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2017-09/08/content\\_40005193.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2017-09/08/content_40005193.htm); and Hua Xiaohui "Fayang wo jun guangrong chuantong wei 'Yidai Yilu' baojia huhang—Jinian Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun jian jun 90 zhounian" [Carrying Forward the Glorious Tradition of Our Armed Forces for the "Belt and Road"—Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army], February 14, 2018, [http://hfzg.hefei.gov.cn/24011/24012/201802/t20180214\\_2480681.html](http://hfzg.hefei.gov.cn/24011/24012/201802/t20180214_2480681.html).



risk the safety of a growing number of Chinese businesses, workers, and assets.<sup>9</sup> By the end of 2014, over one million Chinese nationals were working overseas. Two years later this number had doubled, with 90% of the Chinese workers employed in BRI countries in Asia and Africa.<sup>10</sup> In recent years, Chinese citizens abroad have been killed, kidnapped, and attacked and the number of such incidents is expected to rise.<sup>11</sup> Conflicts in Libya and Yemen have already compelled the emergency evacuation under PLA supervision of Chinese nationals.<sup>12</sup> Nontraditional security threats such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and transnational organized crime could affect the security of both Chinese citizens and infrastructure. Traditional security threats are also a cause of concern, primarily on the Maritime Silk Road, where the main security challenge to China's interests is posed by the U.S. Navy and more generally the U.S. forward military presence in the western Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Persian Gulf regions.<sup>13</sup>

As they try to find appropriate responses to the risks and challenges inherent to BRI's development, Chinese strategic thinkers need to navigate around three major constraints. The first is image management. Since the beginning of China's military modernization, the government has been mindful about international perceptions of its growing military might. As strategic planners contemplate whether and how to extend the PLA's reach in BRI countries, they are painstakingly trying to mitigate impressions that the military could be used as an aggressive instrument of Beijing's expansionist ambitions.<sup>14</sup> Second, Chinese strategists need to think about potential future operations within the framework of China's claimed commitment to respect the principle of noninterference in other countries' domestic affairs. They also have to take into account—and perhaps adjust—China's domestic legal framework to allow future military interventions overseas. Policymakers may also need to rethink China's long-standing rejection of military alliances—perhaps extending “security guarantees” to countries along the Belt and Road routes, as suggested recently by Xi Jinping.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in addition to these normative constraints, planners need to address the gap that is growing between the requirement to protect far-flung national interests and the actual military capabilities available to the PLA.

There remains the question of whether and how Beijing may consider using its military might to deal with contingencies affecting its interests in BRI countries. Will the initiative's regional and global development serve as a justification for an increased Chinese overseas military presence and an expansion of the PLA's scope of action? Will China use its BRI investments (e.g., ports, airports, railways, and fiber-optic and satellite networks) to support military projection? Will the traditional

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<sup>9</sup> Ma Janguang and Zhang Nan, “‘Yidai Yilu’ beijing xia ruhe baohu Zhongguo qiye de haiwai liyi” [How to Protect the Overseas Interests of Chinese Companies in the Background of the “Belt and Road”], *Zhongguo jun wang*, August 17, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/201311jxjh/2016-08/17/content\\_7212299.htm](http://www.81.cn/201311jxjh/2016-08/17/content_7212299.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Statistics are from the China International Contractors Association (CHINCA). See Hao Zhou, “‘Haiwai Zhongguo’ de yinmi shiwei” [The Secret Guards of “Overseas China”], *Caijing*, July 24, 2017, [https://news.caijingmobile.com/article/detail/334033?source\\_id=40](https://news.caijingmobile.com/article/detail/334033?source_id=40).

<sup>11</sup> Among other examples, 4 oil workers were kidnapped in Colombia in 2011, 29 were detained in South Sudan in 2012, and 11 engineers were attacked in Cameroon in 2014. See Ma and Zhang, “‘Yidai Yilu’ beijing xia ruhe baohu Zhongguo qiye de haiwai liyi.”

<sup>12</sup> In March 2011, over 35,000 PRC citizens were evacuated from Libya during the Chinese military's largest noncombatant evacuation operation. See Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, “Implications of China's Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 11, 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/implications-of-chinas-military-evacuation-of-citizens-from-libya>. In March 2015, the PLA Navy was used for the first time to evacuate over 600 PRC citizens from Yemen. See Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “PLA Navy Used for First Time in Naval Evacuation from Yemen Conflict,” Jamestown Foundation, April 3, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/pla-navy-used-for-first-time-in-naval-evacuation-from-yemen-conflict>.

<sup>13</sup> Deng Minghu, “‘Yidai Yilu’ zhanlue xia de junshi liliang chong su yu jingwai yunyang” [The Restructuring and Overseas Use of Military Power Under the “Belt and Road” Strategy], *Dushu hui*, October 19, 2016, <http://www.dushuhui423.com/Activity/ActivityInfoes/Details?id=eb1ea336-92ce-4913-a81c-04383ade02a2>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “Xi Urges Major Risk Prevention to Ensure Healthy Economy, Social Stability,” *Xinhua*, January 22, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/22/c\\_137763248.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/22/c_137763248.htm).

and nontraditional security threats attached to BRI enhance or hamper Beijing's military options? How can China reconcile its preference for nonmilitary means with the need to secure and protect its interests and citizens? Are there indirect options under consideration that might allow China to defend its overseas interests with less than large increments of military force?

The present report is an attempt to address these crucial questions. The publication is the result of a two-year project conducted by the National Bureau of Asian Research, with the generous support of the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security.<sup>16</sup> This project has also gained from the intellectual guidance of senior advisers Andrew Erickson, who is professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College, and Paul Haenle, who holds the Maurice R. Greenberg Director's Chair at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center in Beijing. In order to analyze how BRI affects the security calculations of the PLA and other Chinese security actors, the contributors to this report have paid particular attention to the Chinese strategic community's perspectives in an effort to reflect the options that are being debated within China.<sup>17</sup> Their collective work gives a comprehensive snapshot of current Chinese thinking on how to respond to the security risks associated with the global expansion of BRI.

In the opening essay, Mathieu Duchâtel describes how China's expanding global footprint, especially via BRI, provides strong incentives for adapting existing normative and legal constraints on the use of military force overseas. In the "new era," in which Xi intends to propel China onto the center stage of the world, the military not only is a tool used to defend sovereignty from foreign threats but has become an instrument of global power projection. For the leadership to respond to overseas security crises, Duchâtel explains that "all options are now on the table" and the decision to act militarily will be political rather than legal.

For any type of deployment overseas, the PLA will need robust command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities to help enhance its situational awareness. Michael S. Chase examines how the Digital Silk Road and the Space Information Corridor support China's pursuit of its interests in space and cyberspace. Economic and strategic goals clearly overlap in these domains, and the potential enhancement of C4ISR capabilities, thanks to BRI's digital and satellite networks, aligns with the objectives of the newly established PLA Strategic Support Force, which oversees space and network warfare capabilities.

BRI increases the urgency for the PLA to further develop a flexible expeditionary force capable of more complex, larger, and lengthier deployments away from China's shores. Kristen Gunness examines in detail how the different PLA components are addressing the capability gap: upgrading, improving, and producing new maritime capabilities while working on strategic airlift; strengthening special operations forces; and possibly augmenting border security capabilities to conduct land-based expeditionary missions. The PLA will likely be able to sustain maritime operations overseas relatively soon (by 2025), assesses Gunness.

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<sup>16</sup> The project also resulted in a roundtable published in the April 2019 issue of *Asia Policy* in which leading experts discussed BRI's security implications in South Asia, with a specific focus on how China and other countries in the region are responding to BRI-related security challenges. See Nadège Rolland, Filippo Boni, Meia Nouwens, Nilanthi Samaranyake, Gurpreet S. Khurana, and Arzan Tarapore, "Where the Belt Meets the Road: Security in a Contested South Asia," *Asia Policy* 14, no. 2 (2019), <https://www.nbr.org/publication/where-the-belt-meets-the-road-security-in-a-contested-south-asia>.

<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of this report, the PRC strategic community includes active and retired senior officers from the People's Liberation Army, People's Armed Police, National Defense University, and Academy of Military Science, as well as members of security-related think tanks such as the China Institute for International Strategic Studies and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.

BRI is not focused on China achieving a “dominant position,” explains Guifang (Julia) Xue in her essay on the potential dual use of support facilities. Yet she observes that “investing in ports located in strategic positions no doubt helps China diversify its supply of overseas energy and raw materials, safeguard its SLOC [sea lines of communication] access and security, and improve its overall geopolitical position.” The question therefore is not whether China will need naval bases, but rather how to manage the “concerns and anxiety” about its military intentions along the Belt and Road routes as it opens more of them. Xue reckons that China will not need to establish multiple bases for missions that will essentially be small-scale and low-intensity. A permanent military presence could also be too economically and politically burdensome. She advocates instead for dual-use logistical bases, which are essentially commercial ports that could be used to host naval ships when necessary.

Indirect options are also under consideration. Among them is increasing military diplomacy, international cooperation, and involvement in peacekeeping operations so as to showcase China’s “harmless use of overseas military force.”<sup>18</sup> Raffaello Pantucci examines in particular how China’s longer-term penetration of Central Asia’s security apparatuses through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, training and joint exercises, military aid, and military sales could gradually upend Russia’s security predominance in the region and overturn the two countries’ traditional division of labor between economics and security. Pantucci illustrates how BRI could be the precursor of China’s expanded security footprint in third countries using a multiplicity of security-related tools.

China has also developed innovative frameworks in its immediate neighborhood, principally with an eye on instability in Afghanistan and its possible spillover into Chinese territory. Dirk van der Kley focuses on how Beijing has beefed up its security activities in Tajikistan and at the border with Afghanistan through a three-pronged approach: building capacity, co-opting local forces to protect its own projects and interests, and conducting joint operations with Tajik and Afghan forces near the shared border. His essay provides a useful case study about options that could be implemented elsewhere along the Silk Roads.

New security demands along the Belt and Road routes could also give rise to an increased role for Chinese private security companies, which not long ago were mostly operating at the municipal level in China. Alessandro Arduino describes the arduous path for these thousands of young companies to become highly professionalized units in order to operate in precarious environments overseas. He underlines the opportunity to help shape their rules of engagement and regulatory procedures as the sector slowly matures.

Taken together, these contributions present a sweeping picture of the set of options that are under consideration to enhance the security of China’s interests along the Belt and Road routes. Common to all seven essays is the idea that the expansion of China’s overseas interests naturally creates the need for military protection. Along with normative adjustments and military overseas operations and basing, Beijing can also pursue indirect approaches, such as engaging in extended international cooperation on nontraditional security and subcontracting protection either to host nations or to private contractors. The U.S. government has begun to recognize that the implications of China’s expansion of its security frontier, along the lines described in this report,

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<sup>18</sup> Guo Xiaohang, “Haiwai liyi baohu nengli jianshe: Daguojueqi de bixiu ke” [Building Capacity to Protect Overseas Interests: A Compulsory Course for Rising Great Powers], *Zhongguo jun wang*, March 7, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/jwsj/2016-03/07/content\\_6945691.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwsj/2016-03/07/content_6945691.htm).

will be far-reaching.<sup>19</sup> This expansion could complicate, restrict, or even deny the United States' ability to project power, protect the lines of communication through the global commons, exert influence, and shape future regional security developments, as well as the United States' ability to defend its allies and interests.

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<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access," December 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/14/2002079292/-1/-1/1/EXPANDING-GLOBAL-ACCESS-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>. See also the responses of the nominee for the commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, to questions by the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2018: "Advance Policy Questions for Admiral Philip Davidson, USN Expected Nominee for Commander, U.S. Pacific Command," U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, April 17, 2018, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson\\_APQs\\_04-17-18.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson_APQs_04-17-18.pdf).

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# Overseas Military Operations in Belt and Road Countries: The Normative Constraints and Legal Framework

*Mathieu Duchâtel*

**MATHIEU DUCHÂTEL** is Director of the Asia Program at Institut Montaigne. Dr. Duchâtel worked in Beijing as the China representative of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) from 2011 to 2015 and at the European Council of Foreign Relations from 2015 to 2018. He can be reached at <[mduchatel@institutmontaigne.org](mailto:mduchatel@institutmontaigne.org)>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay explores possibility of future Chinese military operations in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries in defense of China's overseas interests and discusses the constraints that could prevent such operations.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

China has followed three models for protecting its overseas interests. In Djibouti, China built a naval base in a break with its strategic history. On its western border with Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the country is following a Mekong model, albeit in a very low-key manner to avoid international attention. In Syria, China free-rides and prioritizes access to intelligence about individuals who could target Chinese interests. These three approaches have in common the prioritization of both capacity building and intelligence acquisition. The overarching goal is to build a strategic position that will give China options when a serious crisis requires an immediate response. If confronted with such a crisis, all the ingredients exist for China to conduct overseas military operations: growing capacities, strong political support, an expansionist narrative centered on the defense of overseas interests, a new posture on military bases, and the risks inherent to China's increasing international human and economic footprint in BRI countries. Within this context, it is only a matter of time before the People's Liberation Army or People's Armed Police is dispatched on missions to defend overseas interests. Nonetheless, cost-benefit assessments in Beijing and a weak logistical network will continue to constrain future overseas military operations.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- How to deal with an interventionist China that considers military power as a foreign policy tool should become a central policy question on the transatlantic agenda.
- China uses the legitimate defense of its expanding security interests to enlarge its global footprint and compete with the United States. The narrative of protecting overseas interests is difficult to counter, but at a minimum it invites deeper engagement with states that consider military cooperation with China as a credible alternative.
- China's defense of its overseas interests will create opportunities for cooperation against nontraditional security threats. However, there is very little for the West to gain in actively pursuing cooperation with China, and the West instead should focus on setting strict terms for examining Chinese engagement offers.

For more than a decade, China's foreign and security policy has been slowly shifting away from the principle of noninterference in another sovereign state's affairs as the country's global economic and human footprint increases. "Overseas interests" (*haiwai liyi*) and unforeseen international crises putting Chinese lives at risk have done more to persuade China to rethink noninterference than years of Western pressure on Beijing to endorse humanitarian intervention. But while Jiang Zemin's "going out" policy supported the global expansion of Chinese companies without giving much thought to related security risks, Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is being pursued with greater awareness of potential threats to Chinese nationals and assets abroad. In August 2018 in Pakistan, Defense Minister Wei Fenghe declared that China was ready to "provide strong security guarantees" to support BRI projects.<sup>1</sup> In the past decade, China has already created a risk-management toolbox that includes improving consular protection, regulating the overseas activities of Chinese firms, and systematically conducting civilian evacuations from crisis zones.

This essay explores the possibility of a Chinese military operation in a BRI country in response to threats or attacks against China's overseas interests. It starts from the observation that all options are now on the table for the Chinese leadership to respond to overseas security crises—a shift that began under Hu Jintao but that has been fully endorsed and consolidated under Xi. Are there institutional or legal constraints that would prevent a Chinese military response to an attack against a BRI project? The nature of China's exercise of executive power suggests that constraints on the use of force overseas will be political rather than legal. Assessments in Beijing of possible costs and benefits of military operations are likely to prevail when a crisis of sufficient scale occurs to trigger a discussion of military options. At the same time, any overseas operation would be constrained by the weak logistical network supporting China's global military deployment, compared with that of a more established military power, especially the United States.

The first section of this essay describes how Xi has changed China's thinking regarding the use of military power overseas, accelerating a transformation already underway and stressing the preparedness of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to conduct overseas operations. The second section explores three different models of military power projection: the construction of overseas bases, patrols across China's national borders, and a combination of free-riding and diplomatic means. The third section discusses the consequences of China's adoption in 2015 of a counterterrorism law for the probability of overseas military operations. Finally, the conclusion outlines future scenarios for force deployment and argues that crises will drive further change in China's global military posture.

## Toward a Global Military Posture: From Changing Interests to Xi's "New Era"

Xi Jinping inherited a foreign policy that already placed priority on the protection of nationals overseas, including through the deployment of military assets for noncombatant evacuation operations. The evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011 created a precedent for the PLA Navy and Air Force to conduct such operations, and this orientation was confirmed in 2015

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<sup>1</sup> Huang Panyue, "Chinese Defense Minister Meets Pakistani Naval Chief of Staff," China Military Online, April 19, 2018, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-04/19/content\\_4809874.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-04/19/content_4809874.htm).

when the PLA Navy task force in the Gulf of Aden was redirected to conduct an evacuation from Yemen through Djibouti.

As a leader who systematically emphasizes the importance of military power, Xi has brought significant change to China's national defense policy, considerably accelerating the transformation already underway from a regional to a global security posture. He set for the PLA the goal of becoming a world-class force by 2050 and regularly calls on troops to improve their combat readiness. To this end, China has made three specific decisions that clearly define overseas military operations as an option in its crisis-management toolbox.

First, China adopted its first counterterrorism law in 2015. Article 71 of the law sets the stage for future overseas operations using the following vague language: "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) may assign people to leave the country on counterterrorism missions as approved by the Central Military Commission." The November 2014 draft of the law had included an additional precondition for such missions, stipulating that they would be approved "through agreements reached with relevant countries."<sup>2</sup> This provision, however, was absent from the final version adopted by the National People's Congress.

Second, China brought to an end years of debate regarding overseas military basing. In 2016, the Ministry of National Defense confirmed that an agreement had been reached with Djibouti. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented that such "logistical support facilities" would be built when needed to protect the country's overseas interests. The PLA now officially calls Djibouti a "support base." Rumors abound regarding future basing agreements. While there is a lack of evidence to determine precisely where the next support bases will be built, building such bases is no doubt part of China's national security policy thinking. During a 2016 press conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when asked about Djibouti, explained that China would build "some necessary infrastructure and logistical capacities in regions with a concentration of Chinese interests" and described this as "not just reasonable and logical, but also consistent with international practice."<sup>3</sup>

Third, beginning in 2016, China changed its posture in greater Central Asia to protect the Xinjiang border from incursions and other outside influence. This is most probably the year when it started joint patrols with the Afghan National Army on the Wakhan Corridor and established a small military outpost in Tajikistan. Details still remain scarce, and there is almost no official communication about this development.

Public policies change as a result of changes in ideas, interests, or institutions. China's new approach to the use of military power overseas is the result of shifting interests that have led the country to rethink its national strategy. Under Xi, and especially since the inauguration of his second term, China's ambition has been to gain global leadership by 2050, as articulated by Xi in his work report to the 19th Party Congress. Many Chinese international relations experts define the vision for a "new era" presented at the Party Congress as a quest for power after three decades under Mao Zedong that focused on regaining sovereignty and three subsequent decades started by Deng Xiaoping that prioritized accumulating wealth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The full Chinese text is available from the Chinese National People's Congress, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/lfgz/flca/2014-11/03/content\\_1885027.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/lfgz/flca/2014-11/03/content_1885027.htm).

<sup>3</sup> "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), March 9, 2016, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1346238.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1346238.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Ma Min, "Ruhe lijie xin shidai 'qiang qilai' de shenke neihan" [How to Understand the Profound Connotation of "Strengthening" in the New Era], *Guangming Daily*, September 20, 2018, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0920/c40531-30304401.html>.



This division of recent Chinese history into periods of three decades, with each period underlining a different strategic focus, has framed the mainstream interpretation in China's think-tank circles of the strategic roadmap articulated by Xi at the 19th Party Congress. It is only natural for a country in search of great-power status and global leadership to look at its military forces as an instrument of global power projection rather than only as a tool to defend its sovereignty from foreign threats, even though the latter remains the primary task of any military force. This new posture is also a reflection of China's abandonment of a low profile in foreign policy, premised on Deng's injunction to "bide your time and build your strength" (*taoguang yanghui*), and the transition to a much more active approach that "strives for achievements" (*fenfayouwei*), which was debated before the 19th Party Congress.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, under Xi, the Chinese discussion about the projection of military power is proceeding from a new starting point. The focus is no longer on denying that China is pursuing such a capability but on defining the practical conditions that would lead to an overseas operation. Xi's series of decisions endorsing the idea of a global military able to defend Chinese interests far away from the country's borders has shifted mainstream thought in the Chinese strategic community. Five years earlier, analysts in China dismissed the possibility of an overseas military deployment unless there was a mandate from the UN Security Council and an official invitation from the host country—a repetition of a clear Chinese policy line.<sup>6</sup> There is much less certainty today. Chinese experts have had to adjust to the reality of a permanent Chinese naval base in Djibouti (without a UN mandate) and consider the high likelihood that more bases might be constructed in the next decade, in light of the new narrative promoted by Xi. It is now a given that the counterterrorism law could be activated under certain conditions, such as an attack against Chinese nationals in foreign countries. Interviews I conducted with the strategic community in Beijing and Shanghai in July 2018 revealed that Chinese experts no longer dismiss the possibility of military operations overseas in this changed context.

### Three Models for Rethinking the Role of the PLA in Protecting Overseas Interests

That all options are on the table to respond to an overseas crisis does not mean that military operations will be conducted systematically, or recklessly. Under Xi Jinping, three models for protecting Chinese overseas interests can be observed. In Djibouti, China has built a naval base in a break with its strategic history. On its western border, the country is following a Mekong model, albeit in a very low-key manner to avoid international attention. In Syria, China free-rides and prioritizes access to intelligence about individuals who could target Chinese interests. These three approaches have in common the prioritization of both capacity building and intelligence acquisition. The overarching goal is to build a strategic position that will give China options when a serious crisis needs an immediate response.

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<sup>5</sup> Dingding Chen, "Chinese Foreign Policy Needs Major Reform," *Diplomat*, August 21, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/08/chinese-foreign-policy-needs-major-reform>.

<sup>6</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel, Oliver Bräuner, and Zhou Hang, *Protecting China's Overseas Interests: The Slow Shift Away from Non-interference*, Policy Paper 41 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2014).

## *The Djibouti Model*

The opening of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in August 2018 amounts to no less than a change of strategic identity for the country on the world stage. The absence of foreign bases used to be a signature of Chinese foreign policy. It allowed Beijing to disseminate a narrative underlining the fundamental difference in the strategic posture between China and the United States. This period is now history. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has made clear that similar facilities will be built when needed to protect China's overseas interests. In an April 2019 interview with China Central Television, the political commissar of the Djibouti naval base, Li Chunpeng, reiterated this new policy that the "Chinese navy's support for far sea escort missions will gradually shift from a model based on supply ships supplemented by foreign ports to one that is based on overseas bases supplemented by foreign ports and domestic supports."<sup>7</sup>

Only the future use of the Djibouti naval base will allow observers to define the exact scope of its missions. Officially, the Ministry of National Defense emphasizes three missions for the base: to act as a hub for the deployment of peacekeeping troops, to provide logistical support for antipiracy patrols, and to support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations. While a peacekeeping operations deployment through Djibouti has yet to be conducted, the two other missions have already taken place. The deployment of the *Peace Ark* hospital ship in August 2017 was an example of an HADR mission conducted in Djibouti.

Two questions remain about the future use of the base. First, Chinese experts frequently argue that the "Djibouti support base will to a large degree enable the resolution of the crises faced by Chinese nationals overseas."<sup>8</sup> What kind of operations will be conducted to defend those interests? The PLA's noncombatant evacuation operations in Yemen and Libya took place without the need to establish a security perimeter on the ground. If future evacuations take place in more acute threat environments, Djibouti would be able to offer the option of an amphibious deployment of marines. The United States' Operation Eastern Exit (the 1991 evacuation by the Marine Corps and Navy SEALs of diplomats and civilians from Mogadishu in Somalia using helicopters) is an example of the shape that future Chinese missions might take.

Second, the size of the facility, its fortification, and the presence of marines suggest that China could use the base at Djibouti for more than the three missions put forward by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And indeed, some Chinese experts argue that the strategic value of Djibouti goes beyond specific operations.<sup>9</sup> At stake is Xi's goal of transforming China into a "strong maritime country" (*haiyang qiangguo*), and from that perspective building Djibouti represents a "breakthrough from the encirclement" (*tupo chongwei*) that China faces in the western Pacific. This reflection points to the fact that Djibouti is a base for the navy. At a minimum, there are signs that the PAP expressed an interest in deploying personnel in Djibouti, but the PLA Navy was able to secure the exclusive right to operate the base, prevailing in what amounts to a form of interservice competition.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that other services, and in particular the PLA Air Force and the PAP, may try to influence political decisions to also obtain overseas footholds.

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<sup>7</sup> This interview was first spotted by Adam Ni on his Twitter feed. See the video from the China Central Television program *Military Affairs Report*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4DyQGgTljk&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>8</sup> Yang Ke and Gao Yang, "Qian xi Jibuti baozhang jidi jianshe de zhanlue jiazhi" [Analysis of the Strategic Value of the Construction of the Djibouti Base], *Journal of Shijiazhuang University* 20, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with a senior military analyst, Beijing, March 2018.

## *The Mekong Model*

Since 2016, the PLA has adopted a new approach to the security of China's western border. This new posture in Xinjiang is linked to an unprecedented initiative of the PLA and marks the first time it has taken a leadership role in building a multilateral cooperation framework. In August 2016 the inaugural meeting of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), composed of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan, took place in Urumqi.<sup>11</sup> The QCCM institutionalizes China's military cooperation with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan (three countries vulnerable to terrorist activity) and has established an annual working group meeting—the last of which took place in Beijing in January 2019.<sup>12</sup> This arrangement frames intelligence cooperation and military-to-military exchanges between the four countries in a context of terrorist threats linked to the war in Afghanistan and of intense repression in Xinjiang. Under the QCCM, two agreements were signed in August 2017 in Dushanbe: the Agreement on the Coordination Mechanism in Counterterrorism by Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan Armed Forces and the Protocol on Counterterrorism Information Coordination Center by Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan Armed Forces.<sup>13</sup> While the existence of these two agreements is public, their content is not.

As a result, Chinese troops have been posted in Tajikistan, overlooking the Wakhan Corridor and the border with Xinjiang, most likely since 2016.<sup>14</sup> The QCCM has played a role in facilitating the deployment in Afghanistan and Tajikistan of the PAP (most likely its border force) and perhaps the PLA. The units spotted patrolling the Wakhan Corridor with the Afghan National Army seem to be from the PAP, while there has been no confirmation about Tajikistan. Chinese security researchers readily acknowledge in private that China already has a military presence in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but the government is remarkably discreet about this recent development.

China's new deployments are part of a cooperative framework rather than a unilateral action. The Afghan side has confirmed that Beijing has promised assistance in setting up a mountain brigade, and Afghanistan is requesting combat helicopters as part of this assistance. The Tajik facility makes logistical sense given the extreme natural conditions of the area as a desert over 3,500 meters above sea level that is covered in snow for most of the year. Its primary function seems to be to provide support to border patrols. A large facility is not needed to achieve this goal.

Some Chinese analysts have invoked the "Mekong model" to describe these developments on China's western border.<sup>15</sup> This comparison with the Mekong River patrols that the PAP's border force has conducted with the law-enforcement agencies of Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia since 2011 makes sense to some extent. In both cases, China has spearheaded the creation of a quadrilateral cooperation mechanism allowing for the forward deployment of Chinese armed

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<sup>11</sup> "Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan Issue Joint Statement on Anti-terrorism," China Military Online, August 4, 2016, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-08/04/content\\_4707451.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-08/04/content_4707451.htm).

<sup>12</sup> "A Zhong Ba Ta 'siguo jizhi' lianhe gongzuo zu nianzhong huiyi zai Jing juxing" [The Year-End Meeting of the Joint Working Group of the "Four-Nation Mechanism" of Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan Was Held in Beijing], Embassy of the PRC in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, January 27, 2019, <http://af.china-embassy.org/chn/sgxw/t1632739.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> "Di er jie 'A Zhong Ba Ta' siguo jundui fankong hezuo xietiao jizhi gaoji lingdaoren huiyi zai Dushangbie juxing" [The Second Senior Leaders Meeting of the Four-Country "Afghanistan-China-Pakistan-Tajikistan" Armed Forces Anti-Terrorism Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism held in Dushanbe], Xinhua, August 27, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-08/27/c\\_1121550257.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-08/27/c_1121550257.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html).

<sup>15</sup> Author's interviews with academics and think-tanks experts, Beijing and Shanghai, July 2018.

power, with an emphasis on border security. But there is also a major difference. The deployment in Southeast Asia has received enormous attention in the Chinese media, whereas the activities on the western border receive none. This reflects a very different threat assessment. While the Mekong River patrols target organized crime, the PAP's presence around the Wakhan Corridor is directed at terrorist organizations that are highly tolerant of the risk of death. Hence, China could desire to downplay its actions there to avoid attracting too much attention from hostile groups.

### *The Damascus Model*

In August 2018 the Chinese special envoy for Syria, Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan, stated that “recently, some media speculations that China is going to [be] involve[d] in the Syrian conflict emerged. That is a false picture of the Chinese policy. These Arab media, which issued the relevant material, later explained that China had no military presence in Syria. China is strongly advocating settlement of the conflict only by peaceful means...China has never sent its troops to Syria.”<sup>16</sup> The ambassador was denying media speculation after he and the Chinese defense attaché posted to Syria were quoted as saying that the Chinese military could help the Syrian army in the battle for Idlib if the political decision were made in Beijing.<sup>17</sup>

China has a direct security stake in the Syrian war. Hundreds of Uighur fighters have joined the conflict, a minority of them with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and a majority fighting in organizations linked to al Qaeda that are operating in the Idlib region at the border with Turkey.<sup>18</sup> The presence of foreign fighters capable of targeting Chinese interests thus far has resulted in a diplomatic rather than a military response by Beijing. China is free-riding on Russia and Syria to solve its problem with foreign fighters, while diplomatically it works at getting more support from Turkey to avoid a scenario where Turkey becomes a safe haven for Idlib's Uighur foreign fighters. China has ruled out direct military involvement in the Syrian conflict as too costly politically, with unpredictable consequences.

In the Damascus model, the involvement of the PLA in an overseas crisis directly affecting Chinese security interests—such as the safety of Chinese nationals or the sustainability of investment and economic projects—will remain limited to access to intelligence. Indeed, there is a presence of Chinese intelligence personnel and military advisers reported in Syria.<sup>19</sup> The Damascus model is thus a mix of free-riding and intelligence work to manage the security implications for China in a low-key manner.

## Debating Article 71: The PAP's Future Counterterrorism Missions Abroad

When asked about the conditions under which China could make use of Article 71 of the counterterrorism law, many Chinese experts acknowledge that all options are on the table and

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<sup>16</sup> “Chinese Army Won't Deploy to Syria for Idlib Offensive,” *Eurasia Review*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/21082018-chinese-army-wont-deploy-to-syria-for-idlib-offensive>.

<sup>17</sup> “China, Syria: Officials Say the Chinese Military Is Willing to Help the Syrian Army Retake Idlib,” *Stratfor*, August 4, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/china-military-officials-help-syrian-army-retake-idlib>.

<sup>18</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel, “China's Foreign Fighters Problem,” *War on the Rocks*, January 25, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/chinas-foreign-fighters-problem>.

<sup>19</sup> Mollie Saltskog and Colin P. Clarke, “The U.S. Withdrawal from Syria Is an Opportunity for China,” *Lawfare*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/us-withdrawal-syria-opportunity-china>.

argue that the nature of the crisis will determine China's response.<sup>20</sup> But the same analysts insist that China will not easily abandon caution. Despite years of change, the mainstream view remains to "avoid creating new enemies" (*bimian shudi*), to "avoid setting the fire that will burn yourself" (*bimian yinhuo shaoshen*), and to "avoid becoming the center of contradictions" (*bimian biancheng maodun de zhongxin*).

Chinese experts have commented in the media on the removal from the final approved version of the counterterrorism law of an invitation from the local country as a requirement for overseas military operations. For example, on a Phoenix Television military show, commentator Wang Guoxiang noted that such prior approval was no longer necessary to deploy forces in countries that provide safe havens to terrorist organizations.<sup>21</sup> Li Wei, China's leading commentator on terrorism issues and former director of the Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, has proposed a more moderate and political interpretation of Article 71. He argues that China needs consultations with the host country to agree on a common plan of action before deploying the military on overseas counterterrorism missions, an evolution he describes as a historical necessity.<sup>22</sup>

There are signs that the PAP, whose Snow Leopard commandos are already deployed in Kabul and Baghdad to protect Chinese embassies, is pushing to seize greater international responsibilities in the context of Article 71 of the counterterrorism law. Zhou Jian, a professor at the Armed Police Force University, notes that counterterrorism is a "statutory task" (*fading renwu*) of the PAP and that dispatching missions overseas is an "irreplaceable means" (*wuke tidai de shouduan*) when all other options are exhausted. He develops the argument that the PAP has a duty to conduct overseas counterterrorism missions and thus needs to accumulate the capacity to carry out such missions efficiently.<sup>23</sup>

Niu Weiding, a senior colonel with the PAP, has argued that, though the scope of application of Article 71 should be more precise, the mere existence of this article allows the PAP to review possible options against the threat of terrorism.<sup>24</sup> His suggestion is to focus on capacity building, with two priorities: special forces and the whole spectrum of intelligence activities (from collection to informed decision-making). Special forces can perform a wide range of counterterrorism missions, including the liberation of hostages, securing of endangered infrastructure, decapitation strikes, destruction of terrorist bases, and possibly the integration with multinational operations.

The same logic emphasizing capacity building and the importance of intelligence activities shapes the discussion of the consequences of the counterterrorism law. At this stage, creating options for future operations seems to be the priority.

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<sup>20</sup> Author's interviews with academics and think-tanks experts, Beijing and Shanghai, July 2018.

<sup>21</sup> "Yingdui kong xi xinlang chao jiefangjun chujing fankong bu xu suozai guo pizhun" [Responding to the Terrorist Attacks, the New Wave of the PLA's Exit and Anti-terrorism Does Not Require Approval from the Host Country], *China Daily*, July 15, 2016, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/wifiKey/Homecn/2016-07/15/cd\\_26109378.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/interface/wifiKey/Homecn/2016-07/15/cd_26109378.html).

<sup>22</sup> "Zhuanjia: Zhongguo chujing fankong shi biran qushi" [Expert Opinion: China's Exit from Antiterrorism Is an Inevitable Trend], *Takungbao*, December 29, 2015, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2015-12/3260272.html>.

<sup>23</sup> "Wujing budui chujing fankong shi biran yaoqiu lifa shi zai bi xing" [The Outbreak of Anti-terrorism by the Armed Police Force Is Inevitable That the Legislation Is Imperative], *Legal Daily*, January 28, 2016, <http://finance.sina.com.cn/sf/news/2016-01-28/110619001.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Niu Weiding, "Wujing Budui chujing fankong wenti yanjiu" [A Study on the Out-of-Terrorism Issues of the People's Armed Police], *China Military Science*, no. 1 (2017): 82–87, <http://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-XKSJ201701011.htm>.

## Future Scenarios: Navigating Risks, Constraints, and Ambitions

Overall, China's approach to overseas military operations still is characterized by a relative lack of institutionalization. But the country's expanding global footprint, in particular through BRI, provides a strong incentive for Beijing to improve its crisis-management toolbox. In view of the changing presence of China in international security hotspots and of the new narrative of global military power promoted by Xi Jinping, what could be the preferred next steps to facilitate the PLA's future overseas deployment? Given China's current thinking and capacities, what could trigger an overseas military operation, and what would signal a change in practice? Will China further adapt its institutional and legal framework, building on the PLA's first overseas base at Djibouti and the new counterterrorism law?

It is only a matter of time before the PLA or the PAP is dispatched on new overseas counterterrorism missions. The lesson from the gradual expansion of the global footprint of the PLA and the PAP in the past ten years, from the Gulf of Aden to the Mekong River and the Wakhan Corridor, is that their posture changes in response to crises rather than as part of a plan—even if there is an overarching narrative supporting the idea of gradual expansion.

Therefore, predicting the future footprint of the PLA and the PAP is a matter of predicting the crises that will undermine Chinese overseas interests. Terrorist attacks are high on that list, and the closer they are conducted to places where China already has a military presence, the more likely China is to respond militarily. In greater Central Asia, an attack against a BRI infrastructure project on a large enough scale could provoke China to retaliate against the individuals or the group that carried out the operation. Such operations could take the form of air strikes, including with armed drones, or targeted killings conducted by special forces. The PLA would activate the counterterrorism law and work through the QCCM or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to obtain political endorsement. If the operation took place in Tajikistan, China would seek the endorsement of the local government and of Russia. Institutions such as the QCCM and the SCO would prove their value in such a scenario. However, the case of Pakistan—the country where Chinese nationals have suffered the largest number of attacks in the past decade—clearly shows China's preference for relying on the security measures that local military and law enforcement can offer. It is only when such arrangements are no longer possible that the PLA can be expected to be dispatched.

A second scenario of overseas deployment that builds on the past record of PLA operations is noncombatant evacuations under complex security conditions. Evacuations are now the standard response to overseas crises, but China has never had to conduct such an operation from a zone controlled by hostile forces. Evacuations of diplomatic personnel from embassies under siege and operations to release hostages also likely would be part of the PLA's and the PAP's future playbooks. For such operations, the counterterrorism law is a sufficient basis.

There are two possible scenarios for the building of China's next overseas base. The conservative scenario is a replication of the Djibouti *modus operandi* whereby no additional bases would be built unless China could present a convincing narrative to the world framing the protection of its overseas interests as a responsible contribution to international security. Such an approach would prevent China from setting up a military presence in Cambodia or Vanuatu, where a responsible security stakeholder narrative would be impossible to promote. The alternative scenario is an aggressive base-building approach driven by geopolitics and strategic rivalry with the United

States that goes far beyond the logic of protecting overseas interests. Such an approach would be extremely costly for China.

Black swans will also play a role in China's future course of action regarding overseas bases. The possibility of a terrorist attack leading to a military intervention and then the decision to establish a permanent base is real. China will have to gradually transform itself into a credible security partner for countries to accept hosting a Chinese base on their soil. A violent act of piracy against a Chinese ship in the Gulf of Guinea could provide the basis for such a scenario to unfold.

The future institutionalization of China's global military footprint will thus likely be crisis-driven in the sense that it will be heavily shaped by events. But another driver for change will be the current emphasis on laws, rules, and regulations—the rule-by-law approach to governance under Xi (to be distinguished from the rule-of-law model). This distinction also exists in Chinese language. While both terms are pronounced “fazhi,” the “zhi” in “rule of law” indicates that the law is the ultimate reference in the hierarchy of governance, whereas in “rule by law” the executive branch rules through administrative regulations and other legal documents. Chinese scholars call for legal clarity and a more comprehensive set of regulations to better frame future overseas operations. For example, Wang Xinjian argues that China should “accelerate the process of constructing laws and regulations governing overseas military operations.”<sup>25</sup> This approach is centered on internal administrative regulations and stresses the importance of clarity and predictability regarding not only the cost of military operations overseas and the training of personnel involved in those operations but also the rules governing naval escorts, counterterrorism missions, and HADR. Wang recommends that China should pay particular attention to expanding the number and scope of existing bilateral agreements that will affect the conduct of overseas deployments. The “entry of military ships and planes into the airspace and territorial seas of partner countries” should be governed by “clear principles and operating procedures.”

In sum, the ingredients exist for future overseas military operations: growing capacities, strong political support, an expansionist narrative centered on the defense of overseas interests, a new posture on military basing, and the risks inherent to China's increasing international human and economic footprint in BRI countries. The military domain remains an area in which politics prevail over rules and regulations, and international crises and geopolitics will be the decisive determinants of any decision taken in Beijing to deploy the PLA or the PAP overseas.

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<sup>25</sup> Wang Xinjian, “Haiwai junshi xingdong lifa yanjiu” [On the Legislation of Overseas Military Operations], *Journal of Xi'an Politics Institute* 29, no. 5 (2016): 104–8.





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# The Space and Cyberspace Components of the Belt and Road Initiative

*Michael S. Chase*

**MICHAEL S. CHASE** is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation and an Adjunct Professor at the Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He can be reached at <[chase@rand.org](mailto:chase@rand.org)>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the space and cyberspace components of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and assesses their role in the expanding scope of BRI as well as in China's broader efforts to protect its economic and security interests.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Chinese strategists view space and cyberspace as domains that have become critical to economic development as well as to defense and national security objectives. From their point of view, Chinese economic and security interests increasingly extend into space and cyberspace, and these domains are becoming a growing focus of international competition. Consequently, China must enhance its ability to use space and cyberspace to its advantage while preventing an adversary from exploiting any potential Chinese vulnerabilities in these areas. Space systems (and related applications) and information and communications technology (ICT) are also areas in which Chinese officials anticipate considerable demand for investment in many BRI countries. Indeed, China's proposed Belt and Road Space Information Corridor, which features applications and services related to navigation and positioning, remote sensing, weather, and communications satellites, and the Digital Silk Road, which focuses on the development of communications networks, smart cities, and e-commerce activities, are emerging as important components of BRI. Beijing appears to view the two initiatives as means of expanding its economic and political influence in parts of the world that it sees as increasingly important to its interests.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- BRI projects related to space and cyberspace could increase participating countries' economic dependence on China in ways that might give Beijing even greater leverage over them.
- Growing reliance on ICT provided by Chinese companies with close ties to China's military and intelligence services could also exacerbate security risks for recipient countries, including some U.S. allies and partners.
- The U.S. and allies such as Japan and Australia could respond to the space and cyber components of China's BRI by offering to provide innovative space capabilities, ICT investments, and cybersecurity assistance to key participants as an alternative to reliance on Chinese space systems and communications networks.

This essay examines the space and cyberspace components of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor and the Digital Silk Road—and assesses their role in the seemingly ever-expanding scope of BRI, as well as in China's broader efforts to protect its economic and security interests. Beijing's determination to extend BRI from the maritime and terrestrial domains into space and cyberspace should come as no surprise. Chinese strategists are increasingly concerned about protecting China's economic and security interests in these important domains.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting this growing awareness of how China's interests extend into space and cyberspace, official documents, speeches by top leaders, and articles by strategists, scholars, and analysts highlight space and cyberspace as domains that have become critical not only for China's economic development but also for its defense and national security objectives. For example, China's 2015 white paper on military strategy assesses that “outer space has become a commanding height in international strategic competition” and indicates that the country will “deal with security threats and challenges in that domain, and secure its space assets to serve its national economic and social development, and maintain outer space security.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the military strategy white paper states that “cyberspace has become a new pillar of economic and social development, and a new domain of national security,” and argues that China must respond by enhancing its cyber capabilities to “stem major cyber crises, ensure national network and information security, and maintain national security and social stability.”<sup>3</sup>

Space systems (and related applications) and information and communications technology (ICT) are also areas in which Chinese officials and analysts anticipate considerable demand for investment in many of the BRI countries. Beijing's emphasis on these domains thus dovetails nicely with its vision for the initiative. Indeed, the growing focus on the space and digital components of BRI was also foreshadowed in key policy documents several years ago. Perhaps most notably, China's March 2015 white paper on BRI placed space and digital connectivity among the top “cooperation priorities.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the white paper stated: “We should jointly advance the construction of cross-border optical cables and other communications trunk line networks, improve international communications connectivity, and create an Information Silk Road. We should build bilateral cross-border optical cable networks at a quicker pace, plan transcontinental submarine optical cable projects, and improve spatial (satellite) information passageways to expand information exchanges and cooperation.”<sup>5</sup>

Some observers have dismissed the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor and Digital Silk Road as reflecting a lack of priorities in an initiative that has seemingly ballooned from the originally envisioned Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to include outer space, cyberspace, and even the Arctic. For its part, Beijing seems to view the space and cyber components as important not only in terms of expanding Chinese influence within the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kevin Pollpeter, “Space, the New Domain: Space Operations and Chinese Military Reforms,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 5–6 (2016): 709–27; and Joe McReynolds, “China's Evolving Perspectives on Network Warfare: Lessons from the Science of Military Strategy,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, April 16, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2015-05/26/content\\_6507716.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2015-05/26/content_6507716.htm).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce (PRC), “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” March 28, 2015, [http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330\\_669367.html](http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

context of BRI but also because they support China's pursuit of its economic and security interests more generally.

Although China's Belt and Road Space Information Corridor and Digital Silk Road initiatives may be somewhat vaguely defined, they consist of a number of substantial undertakings in areas from increasing the reliance of BRI countries on Chinese space systems to constructing fiber-optic cable networks connecting key regions. They also could have important implications for the economic and security interests of the United States and its allies and partners. These space and cyberspace initiatives could increase economic dependence on China in ways that give it even greater leverage over participating countries. Moreover, growing reliance on ICT provided by Chinese companies with close ties to China's military and intelligence services could exacerbate security risks for recipient countries. Consequently, China's pursuit of the space and cyberspace goals of BRI is likely to come into conflict with the interests of the United States and some of its allies and partners. Washington thus will need to be prepared to work with concerned countries to respond to these initiatives. Specifically, the United States and allies such as Japan and Australia could try to provide an alternative to Chinese space systems and information networks by enhancing their own cooperation in these domains with key countries along Belt and Road routes.

The remainder of the essay is organized as follows. The next section examines the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor, while the subsequent section evaluates the Digital Silk Road. The conclusion then assesses the implications of these initiatives and considers some potential future developments.

## China's Belt and Road Space Information Corridor

### *The Goals of the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor*

China aims to become a space power second to none because of the importance of space to the pursuit of its broader economic and security goals.<sup>6</sup> The strategic goals of the space program are articulated in a December 2016 white paper. According to the white paper, Beijing aims "to build China into a space power in all respects," which includes the ability to innovate independently, make cutting edge scientific discoveries, promote "strong and sustained economic and social development," and "effectively and reliably guarantee national security."<sup>7</sup> The white paper links the achievement of these goals to "the realization of the Chinese Dream of the renewal of the Chinese nation." China has made remarkable progress in this direction in recent years by greatly improving its capabilities in areas such as launch systems and facilities; telemetry, tracking, and command; earth observation, navigation and positioning, communications, and technology demonstration satellites; manned spaceflight; and deep space exploration.<sup>8</sup>

The December 2016 white paper also highlights the importance of international space exchanges and cooperation, including "strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin Pollpeter et al., "China Dream, Space Dream: China's Progress in Space Technologies and Implications for the United States," report for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 2015, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20Dream%20Space%20Dream\\_Report.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20Dream%20Space%20Dream_Report.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Space Activities in 2016* (Beijing, December 2016), [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2016/12/28/content\\_281475527159496.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/12/28/content_281475527159496.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Pollpeter et al., "China Dream, Space Dream."

<sup>9</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's Space Activities in 2016*.

indicates that one of the “key areas” for future international cooperation is “construction of the Belt and Road Initiative Space Information Corridor.”<sup>10</sup> Earlier that year, in October 2016 the State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry (SASTIND) and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) jointly issued a document entitled “Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Construction and Application of the ‘Belt and Road’ Spatial Information Corridor.” The document indicates that it will take approximately ten years to “basically complete” China’s ambitious vision for the program, with a focus on Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and North Africa, and extending into Oceania, Central and Eastern Europe, and other parts of Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Given the importance of space in Chinese thinking about national security and economic development, and the emphasis that Xi Jinping is attaching to BRI as a vehicle for promoting China’s interests and enhancing its influence in the diplomatic, economic, and security spheres, it should come as no surprise that Beijing’s ambitious plans in the space domain dovetail with the implementation of the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor. Although some observers have dismissed the inclusion of an outer space component in BRI as emblematic of an “everything but the kitchen sink” approach that suggests a lack of strategic focus, Chinese statements and publications indicate that the corridor is important not only in terms of the role it plays in BRI but also because of its alignment with China’s pursuit of space-related economic and security interests.

One relatively early indicator of China’s intent to link space to BRI was the convening of the October 2015 meeting of the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO) in Beijing. The theme of the meeting was “the Belt and Road Initiative for facilitating the space capabilities building of the Asia-Pacific countries.” The APSCO meeting declaration highlighted an agreement among the member countries that China’s “objective of jointly building a community of shared interests, responsibility and destiny” as part of BRI “conforms to the mission of APSCO, and the Space Based Integrated Information Corridor concept proposed by China is consistent with the vision of development and cooperation of APSCO and its Member States.”<sup>12</sup> A few months later, during an April 2016 briefing marking China’s first National Space Flight Day, Xu Dazhe, who serves concurrently as vice minister of China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, administrator of SASTIND, and administrator of the China National Space Administration (CNSA), highlighted the country’s interest in developing the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor in the context of its growing set of space-related international cooperation activities.

Xu’s remarks, as well as his concurrent service in positions related to the information technology industry, defense industry, and space program, suggested that China sees the initiative as one that has implications for both its economic and national security interests.<sup>13</sup> The involvement of SASTIND and aerospace industry officials in events related to the space information corridor also highlights these linkages. For example, at a seminar in September 2017, officials from SASTIND, CNSA, and China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation discussed how China’s development of advanced navigation and positioning, communications, and remote-sensing

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<sup>10</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Space Activities in 2016*.

<sup>11</sup> State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry and NDRC (PRC), “Guanyu jiakuai tuijin ‘Yidai Yilu’ Kongjian Xinxi Zoulang jianshe yu yingyong de zhidao yijian” [Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Construction and Application of the “Belt and Road” Spatial Information Corridor], October 22, 2016, [http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/zcfb/zcfbqt/201611/t20161123\\_827548.html](http://www.ndrc.gov.cn/zcfb/zcfbqt/201611/t20161123_827548.html).

<sup>12</sup> “2015 Beijing Declaration of the Asia Pacific Space Cooperation Organization Development Strategy Forum,” Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, October 27, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> “SCIO Briefing on China’s 1st National Day of Space Flight,” State Council Information Office (PRC), April 23, 2016, available at [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/23/content\\_38309726.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/23/content_38309726.htm).

satellites would help support the space information corridor.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in December 2017, SASTIND and the NDRC jointly organized a meeting at which they highlighted how the corridor would “speed up the pace of China’s aerospace ‘going out’ and provide strong spatial information support and a strong guarantee for the construction of the ‘Belt and Road.’”<sup>15</sup>

### *Areas of Emphasis and Opportunities for International Cooperation*

One of the most important of China’s BRI-related projects is the Beidou satellite navigation system. The system not only is a key element of the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor but in a broader sense also is a cornerstone of China’s efforts to develop modern space capabilities. According to a June 2016 white paper, for China developing its own navigation satellite system is crucial both from a national security perspective because of the capabilities this technology provides to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and from the standpoint of China’s economic and social development.<sup>16</sup> The white paper states that the Beidou system “has been independently constructed and operated by China with an eye on the needs of the country’s national security and economic and social development.” Moreover, it describes the system as “space infrastructure of national significance” and states that Beijing’s goal for its development is to provide “all-time, all-weather and high-accuracy positioning, navigation and timing services to global users.”<sup>17</sup>

The Beidou system is reportedly intended to provide “the digital glue for the roads, railways, ports and industrial parks China intends to build on terra firma.”<sup>18</sup> China thus appears to view it as an important component of a strategy for implementing BRI, one that is intended to further integrate the countries along the Belt and Road routes into a vision for the achievement of China’s regional and eventually global economic and security objectives. As Saadia Pekkanen observes, China “is serious about integrating space-based platforms in its terrestrial Belt-and-Road drive, and is going about it in a methodical and surprisingly open fashion.”<sup>19</sup> In particular, the white paper on the Beidou satellite navigation system indicates that China’s plans to enhance international cooperation related to the system include using it “to serve the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”<sup>20</sup> As part of a phased development plan that will turn Beidou from a regional into a global system over the next several years, China’s objective is “to provide basic services to the countries along the Belt and Road and in neighboring regions by 2018, and to complete the constellation deployment with the launching

<sup>14</sup> Gan Xiao, “‘Yidai Yilu’ Kongjian Xinxi Zoulang jiang wei yanxian yonghu tigong yilanzi fang’an” [“Belt and Road” Space Information Corridor Will Provide a Package for Users Along the Route], Science Net, September 12, 2017, <http://news.sciencenet.cn/htmlnews/2017/9/387905.shtm>.

<sup>15</sup> Yu Xiaojie, “Dazao ‘Yidai Yilu’ Kongjian Xinxi Zoulang zhongguo hangtian lianjie ‘taikong si lu’” [Creating a “Belt and Road” Space Information Corridor, China Aerospace Connects the “Space Silk Road”], Xinhua, December 16, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-12/16/c\\_1122121326.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-12/16/c_1122121326.htm).

<sup>16</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Beidou Navigation Satellite System* (Beijing, June 2016), [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2016/06/17/content\\_281475373666770.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/06/17/content_281475373666770.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Trefor Moss, “China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Takes to Space,” *Wall Street Journal*, China Real Time Report, December 28, 2016, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/12/28/chinas-one-belt-one-road-takes-to-space>.

<sup>19</sup> Saadia M. Pekkanen, “China’s Ambitions Fly High: ‘One Belt, One Road’ to Extend into Space,” *Forbes*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saadiampekkannen/2017/05/26/chinas-ambitions-fly-high-one-belt-one-road-to-extend-into-space/#776b68f44c0c>.

<sup>20</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Beidou Navigation Satellite System*.

of 35 satellites by 2020 to provide services to global users.”<sup>21</sup> This strategy not only supports BRI but also is part of a plan to internationalize the Beidou navigation system.<sup>22</sup>

China seems to view the extension of Beidou system services to countries along the Belt and Road routes as a means of competing with GPS, as well as with the Russian GLONASS and European Galileo satellite navigation systems. Pekkanen notes that “as [Beidou] usage spreads, it means that billions of people in the Belt-and-Road region might be using it (not say, GPS) to guide themselves to that restaurant across town, locate a historical site, avoid traffic, carry out their financial transactions, pinpoint their loved ones, and so on. Their mobile phones and tablets will all be empowered by a fleet of China-centered satellites.”<sup>23</sup> Chinese official media reports indicated that Beidou was scheduled to cover all countries along the Belt and Road routes by the end of 2018.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Beidou satellite navigation system plays a central role in China’s plans for the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor, the initiative is not limited to the Beidou system. According to a presentation by the director of the International Cooperation Department of the CNSA, Beijing’s plans for the corridor include navigation satellites, remote-sensing satellites, weather satellites, communications satellites, data-relay satellites, ground stations, data centers, and other ground application systems.<sup>25</sup> Some of the systems described that are already in service and supporting BRI countries include weather satellites. For example, the *People’s Daily* reports that by May 2017 China’s Fengyun weather satellites were already providing data to at least nineteen countries.<sup>26</sup> In June 2018, China launched the Fengyun-2H meteorological satellite, which will enhance services available to BRI countries, according to industry reports.<sup>27</sup> According to the *People’s Daily*, China National Space Administration “is discussing possibilities for a network featuring space and ground integration, which is expected to enormously boost China’s capability to providing satellite service to the Belt and Road countries.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Chinese officials have indicated that China’s aerospace industry would provide launch services, help with the construction of ground stations, and offer training for technical personnel from BRI countries.<sup>29</sup>

China has identified a number of applications that it expects the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor to support. These applications include agriculture, disaster relief, port operations, telemedicine, transportation, financial services, and urban planning, among others, according to Chinese publications and the CNSA presentation. Additionally, some Chinese sources list emergency rescue, counterterrorism, and peacekeeping operations among the potential applications, highlighting the importance of the initiative for the PLA.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Beidou Navigation Satellite System*.

<sup>22</sup> The white paper states: “In line with the Belt and Road Initiative, China will jointly build satellite navigation augmentation systems with relevant nations, provide highly accurate satellite navigation, positioning and timing services, improve the overseas BDS service performances, and promote international applications of navigation technologies. China will also carry out application demonstrations in the fields of transportation, tourism, maritime application, disaster reduction and relief, and agriculture, and boost application on a large scale, through establishing an operation and service platform for highly accurate satellite navigation, positioning and timing services.” Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Pekkanen, “China’s Ambitions Fly High.”

<sup>24</sup> Feng Hua, “Space Cooperation Expands China’s Belt and Road ‘Circle of Friends,’” *People’s Daily*, May 14, 2017, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0514/c90000-9215306.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Jiang Hui, “The Spatial Information Corridor Contributes to UNISPACE +50,” UN Office for Outer Space Affairs, 2018, <http://www.unoosa.org/documents/pdf/copuos/stsc/2018/tech-08E.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> Feng Hua, “Space Cooperation Expands China’s Belt and Road ‘Circle of Friends.’”

<sup>27</sup> Deyana Goh, “China Launches Fengyun-2H, to Be Used by Belt and Road Countries,” Spacetechnic Asia, June 5, 2018, <http://www.spacetechnic.com/china-launches-fengyun-2h-meteorological-satellite-to-serve-belt-road-countries>.

<sup>28</sup> Hua, “Space Cooperation Expands China’s Belt and Road ‘Circle of Friends.’”

<sup>29</sup> Gan, “‘Yidai Yilu’ Kongjian Xinxi Zoulang jiang wei yanxian yonghu tigong yilanzi fang’an.”

<sup>30</sup> Jiang, “The Spatial Information Corridor Contributes to UNISPACE +50.”

China has also established a series of international partnerships along with the creation of the space information corridor and appears to see it as one of many useful components of BRI diplomacy. As the *People's Daily* states, "China is expanding its 'circle of friends' among the Belt and Road countries by taking an active role in serving those countries with advanced space technologies."<sup>31</sup> The corridor involves dozens of agreements between China and participating countries. According to the *People's Daily*, by May 2017 China had signed at least 23 agreements with BRI countries, including India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Russia.<sup>32</sup> China is also conducting related training and exchanges with a number of countries and has signed BRI-related agreements with international and multilateral organizations. In June 2018, for example, it signed a declaration of intent to cooperate on the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor with the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs.<sup>33</sup> China also cooperates on the corridor with APSCO.<sup>34</sup>

## China's Digital Silk Road

As with outer space, China views the cyber domain as increasingly critical for economic and national security reasons. At the National Cybersecurity and Informatization Work Conference in April 2018, Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of this domain, stating that China "must grasp the historical opportunities of informationization development, strengthen positive propaganda on the internet, maintain network security, promote breakthroughs in the development of core technologies in the information field, bring into play the leading role of information technology in economic and social development, strengthen the military-civil integration in the field of network information, and actively participate in cyberspace."<sup>35</sup> As Joe McReynolds observes, however, "despite recent advances in Chinese IT, key state-of-the-art networking technologies are still advanced primarily in the West, and the bulk of the Internet's core architecture is controlled by the United States and its allies." China views this situation as "an intolerable 'network hegemony' imposed by the United States and others."<sup>36</sup> Beijing is determined to revise this unfavorable status quo because of its economic and national security implications. Indeed, as Xi has emphasized, Beijing's efforts in this regard are aimed at transforming China into a comprehensive "cyber power."<sup>37</sup>

In terms of economic development, ICT is seen as essential not only for China's own growth but also as a means of extending its economic influence regionally and globally. Beijing has facilitated the development of this technology in a variety of ways, such as by promoting standards favorable to Chinese economic and political interests, advocating concepts that are associated with

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<sup>31</sup> Feng, "Space Cooperation Expands China's Belt and Road 'Circle of Friends.'"

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See Feng Xueying, "Zhongguo yu Lianheguo qianshu guanyu kaizhan 'Yidai Yilu' Kongjian Xinxi Zoulang hezuo yixiang xuanyan" [China and the United Nations Sign a Declaration on Cooperation Intentions for the Development of the "Belt and Road" Space Information Corridor], *Global Times*, June 19, 2018, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2018-06/12296596.html>; and "China, UN Office Enhance Cooperation on Outer Space Affairs," Xinhua, June 20, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/20/c\\_137265977.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/20/c_137265977.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Jiang, "The Spatial Information Corridor Contributes to UNISPACE +50."

<sup>35</sup> Zhang Xiaosong and Zhu Jichai, "Xi Jinping zai quanguo wangluo anquan he xinxi hua gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao: Jianshe 21 shiji Shuzi Sichou Zhi Lu" [At the National Cybersecurity and Informatization Work Conference, Xi Jinping Emphasized Building the 21st Century Digital Silk Road], Xinhua, April 21, 2018, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/xgcdt/53674.htm>.

<sup>36</sup> McReynolds, "China's Evolving Perspectives on Network Warfare."

<sup>37</sup> "Xi Vows to Build China into a Cyber Power," Xinhua, February 27, 2014, <http://english.cri.cn/6909/2014/02/27/2702s814993.htm>.



mentorship and control of the internet, and supporting key Chinese companies, including some with close ties to the PLA and the intelligence and security services.

The national security reasons for emphasizing the cyber domain include both external and internal security concerns. Xi has stated that “without network security, there would be no national security, there would be no stable economic and social operations, and it would be difficult to guarantee the interests of the broad masses of the people.”<sup>38</sup> From a national defense perspective, Chinese military strategists assess that the struggle for information dominance will greatly influence the outcome of future wars. The PLA is thus focusing on gaining the upper hand in what it calls the “network military struggle,” a concept that includes network reconnaissance and offensive and defensive network warfare.<sup>39</sup> Although China has made major strides in its cyberwarfare capabilities, it still sees itself as occupying a relatively disadvantageous position in this domain. Chinese leaders also view controlling the online environment within China as a domestic security imperative. Accordingly, Beijing has invested heavily in a variety of means of control aimed at censoring content and limiting the potential use of cyberspace to facilitate organized opposition to the Chinese Communist Party.

### *The Goals of the Digital Silk Road*

The largely unspoken goal of the Digital Silk Road seems to be increasing Chinese economic and political influence in the area of ICT along the Belt and Road routes, an undertaking that is already well underway in Southeast Asia.<sup>40</sup> The official goals China has articulated publicly, however, are relatively vague and broad. Chinese officials have linked this initiative to broader objectives, such as promoting China’s transformation into a “network great power” and “enhancing China’s voice and influence in the network space globally.”<sup>41</sup> Media reports indicate that some of the specific objectives associated with the Digital Silk Road include building digital infrastructure, enhancing cybersecurity, and creating a “community of common destiny in cyberspace.”<sup>42</sup>

Official documents and statements generally track with these broad goals, but they tend to be somewhat vague with respect to the details. The concept of a digital silk road was raised in the March 2015 white paper, suggesting that Beijing views it as an important component of BRI.<sup>43</sup> The concept has come up in comments by senior Chinese officials on a number of subsequent occasions. In July 2015, for example, Lu Wei, then the head of the Cyberspace Administration of China, told the China-EU digital cooperation roundtable in Brussels that China was keen to invest in the information infrastructure of BRI countries because of the “infinite opportunities” available to Chinese companies. China would thus “build a digital Silk Road, a Silk Road in cyberspace,” Lu said. Later that month, the vice minister of the Cyberspace Administration of China, Ren Xianliang, called for Chinese technology companies to serve an anticipated market

<sup>38</sup> Zhang and Zhu, “Xi Jinping zai quanguo wangluo anquan he xinxi hua gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao.”

<sup>39</sup> McReynolds, “China’s Evolving Perspectives on Network Warfare.”

<sup>40</sup> Shazeda Ahmed, “ASEAN: A Testing Ground for the Digital Silk Road,” *China-US Focus*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/asean-a-testing-ground-for-the-digital-silk-road>.

<sup>41</sup> “Xinxi hua jianshe dazao shuzi ‘Yidai Yilu’” [Informatized Construction to Create Digital Belt and Road], Cyberspace Administration of China, May 11, 2017, [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/11/c\\_1120954714.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-05/11/c_1120954714.htm).

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, “China Talks of Building a Digital Silk Road,” *Economist*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/05/31/china-talks-of-building-a-digital-silk-road>; and Rachel Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital,” *Council on Foreign Relations, Asia Unbound*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/beijings-silk-road-goes-digital>.

<sup>43</sup> NDRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce (PRC), “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”

of more than a billion internet users, businesses, and other customers along the Belt and Road routes.<sup>44</sup> More recently, the joint communiqué issued upon completion of the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017 highlighted similar themes, calling for “supporting innovation action plans for e-commerce, digital economy, smart cities and science and technology parks.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the joint communiqué issued after the close of the second Belt and Road Forum in April 2019 pledged to “encourage digital infrastructure including transnational fiber-optic highways, promoting e-commerce and smart cities, and helping narrow the digital divide while drawing on international good practices.”<sup>46</sup>

### *Areas of Emphasis and Opportunities for International Cooperation*

The Digital Silk Road consists of projects around the world worth a total of about \$79 billion, according to RWR Advisory Group, with the top countries in terms of estimated spending being India (\$5.9 billion), Mexico (\$4.5 billion), and Malaysia (\$3.7 billion).<sup>47</sup> There appear to be a considerable number of areas of emphasis under the larger umbrella of the Digital Silk Road. Some of the main areas of emphasis appear to include fiber-optic cables, telecom equipment, smart cities and surveillance technology, internet-connected appliances, and e-commerce.<sup>48</sup> Xi and other Chinese leaders have mentioned a number of other areas as well. For example, in a May 2017 speech at the Belt and Road Forum, Xi highlighted the importance of strengthening cooperation in areas such as the digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum computers, big data, cloud computing, and smart cities, highlighting the wide range of technologies and initiatives that appear to be linked to the Digital Silk Road in one way or another.<sup>49</sup> Although some pronouncements are vague and offer little in the way of detail beyond lists of related technologies, many projects are already underway. Rachel Brown observes that “state-owned enterprises including China Telecom, China Unicom, and China Mobile have already embarked on OBOR-related projects and are building out the infrastructure to underlie the digital new silk road.”<sup>50</sup>

One particularly prominent area of emphasis is the construction of fiber-optic cable networks. RWR Advisory Group estimates that China is installing fiber-optic cables in 76 countries.<sup>51</sup> For example, China Mobile is building fiber-optic networks linking China to countries such as Myanmar, Nepal, and Kyrgyzstan, and Huawei has signed a contract to develop a fiber-optic network linking Pakistan, Djibouti, and Kenya.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Huawei and ZTE are undertaking

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<sup>44</sup> Zhao Huanxin, “Web Companies Asked to Support Digital Silk Road,” *China Daily*, July 18, 2015, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/fourmoninternet/2015-07/18/content\\_21318225.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/fourmoninternet/2015-07/18/content_21318225.htm).

<sup>45</sup> “Full Text: Joint Communiqué of Leaders’ Roundtable of Belt and Road Forum,” Xinhua, May 15, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/15/c\\_136286378.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/15/c_136286378.htm).

<sup>46</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the Leaders’ Roundtable of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” April 27, 2019, <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2019/0427/c36-1311.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Sheridan Prasso, “China’s Digital Silk Road Is Looking More Like an Iron Curtain,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-01-10/china-s-digital-silk-road-is-looking-more-like-an-iron-curtain>.

<sup>48</sup> Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>49</sup> “Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum,” Xinhua, May 14, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c\\_136282982.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>51</sup> Prasso, “China’s Digital Silk Road Is Looking More Like an Iron Curtain.”

<sup>52</sup> Nyshka Chandran, “Surveillance Fears Cloud China’s ‘Digital Silk Road,’” CNBC, July 11, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/11/risks-of-chinas-digital-silk-road-surveillance-coercion.html>.

fiber-optic cable network projects in Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup> Another area of emphasis is “smart cities,” a term that refers to the use of ICT to improve the management of everything from mass transit to policing. Chinese companies are working on smart city initiatives and surveillance technology projects in 56 countries, including Malaysia, Kenya, Germany, and the Philippines.<sup>54</sup> The controversial Chinese company ZTE appears to be particularly focused on smart city projects in BRI countries.<sup>55</sup> RWR Advisory Group estimates that Chinese companies are also involved in telecom equipment projects in 21 countries and projects related to internet-connected appliances in 27 countries.<sup>56</sup> Still another area of emphasis under the Digital Silk Road is e-commerce. Major Chinese e-commerce companies like Alibaba and JD.com have ambitious plans to expand overseas, including in BRI countries.<sup>57</sup>

China has also emphasized international cooperation agreements related to the Digital Silk Road. For example, Huawei is running a number of programs in Africa, including one that brings college students from Uganda to China for ICT training.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, China convened the International Cooperation Along the Digital Silk Road Forum at the December 2017 World Internet Conference in Zhejiang Province.<sup>59</sup> The meeting was hosted by the NDRC and attended by government officials as well as business representatives from a number of countries. It resulted in the issuance of a declaration on the Belt and Road Digital Economic International Cooperation Initiative signed by participants from China, Laos, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. As Shazeda Ahmed notes, however, the agreement was long on “rhetoric about closing the digital divide, lowering market barriers to international e-commerce, and constructing high-speed Internet infrastructure,” but offered few details about important issues such as funding and implementation.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

The Belt and Road Space Information Corridor and the Digital Silk Road are emerging as important components of BRI. Beijing appears to view the two initiatives as further means of expanding its economic and political influence in parts of the world that it sees as increasingly important to Chinese interests. The space information corridor is important not only in terms of supporting China’s goals for BRI and its space industry generally but also in terms of enhancing its situational awareness and protecting Chinese security interests in the BRI countries. For example, Chinese analyst He Qisong concludes that Beijing should enhance its advanced reconnaissance satellite capabilities to improve its understanding of potential security threats along the Belt

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<sup>53</sup> Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>54</sup> Prasso, “China’s Digital Silk Road Is Looking More Like an Iron Curtain”; and Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>55</sup> Zen Soo, “ZTE to Play Integral Role in Creating ‘Information Superhighway’ to Connect One Belt, One Road Countries,” *South China Morning Post*, December 2, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/business/article/2051219/zte-play-integral-role-creating-information-superhighway-connect-one-belt>.

<sup>56</sup> Prasso, “China’s Digital Silk Road Is Looking More Like an Iron Curtain.”

<sup>57</sup> Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>58</sup> Wenyuan Wu, “China’s ‘Digital Silk Road’: Pitfalls Among High Hopes,” *Diplomat*, November 3, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/chinas-digital-silk-road-pitfalls-among-high-hopes>.

<sup>59</sup> Owen Fishwick, “China in the Fast Lane on Digital Silk Road,” *China Daily*, December 4, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/4thwic/2017-12/04/content\\_35201648.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/4thwic/2017-12/04/content_35201648.htm).

<sup>60</sup> Ahmed, “ASEAN: A Testing Ground for the Digital Silk Road.”

and Road routes.<sup>61</sup> He also points out that further improvements to Chinese communications and weather satellite capabilities will be necessary to support the PLA.<sup>62</sup> Finally, he suggests that China needs to pursue “the establishment of satellite ground stations in key regions and countries” as “strategic fulcrums.”<sup>63</sup> With respect to the Digital Silk Road, Rachel Brown observes that “many aspects of the concept are a natural extension of the ‘going out’ policies pursued by Chinese telecommunications companies and could fill unmet needs for digital connectivity; greater connectivity could in turn open new markets for Chinese firms in e-commerce and other areas.”<sup>64</sup> As these examples indicate, China’s pursuit of BRI space and cyber initiatives aligns well with its domestic and international priorities. At the same time, however, the prospects for these initiatives are uncertain, and China is likely to face some obstacles moving forward.

### *Potential Challenges and Obstacles*

The greatest challenge China is likely to face as it attempts to promote the spread of Chinese space and information technology systems is that its actions will heighten existing tensions with the United States and a number of other countries in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region. The ongoing battles over controversial issues such as Huawei’s participation in the development of 5G networks highlight the likely role of advanced technology as a primary source of U.S.-China competition going forward. Additionally, technology issues are emerging as major subjects of contention with Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and the United Kingdom, among other countries, illustrating the extent to which Beijing’s pursuit of its space and cyber initiatives under BRI could exacerbate friction in its bilateral relationships.

With respect to the space information corridor in particular, one potential challenge is diplomatic friction arising from the establishment of new satellite ground stations beyond China’s borders. As He Qisong points out, building such facilities could turn out to be a “thorny political issue that needs to be solved with wisdom.”<sup>65</sup> The controversy over China’s satellite ground station in Argentina illustrates some of the ways in which this could be replicated elsewhere if China were to establish additional space-related facilities in BRI countries. Future overseas satellite ground stations could become sources of controversy in relations with the host countries, especially if China is secretive about the facilities and their missions. The satellite ground stations could also become points of contention in China’s relationships with other major powers, or between other major powers and the countries hosting the Chinese facilities, especially if China uses them for defense or intelligence purposes.

China is also likely to encounter potentially serious challenges as it attempts to implement its vision for the Digital Silk Road. These could go well beyond the suspicions about reliance on Chinese technology and the pushback these concerns are creating in the United States and other countries. As Brown points out, the initiative “looks less like a cohesive concept and more like a

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<sup>61</sup> He Qisong, “Tian ji si lu zhu tui ‘Yidai Yilu’ zhanlüe shishi: Junshi anquan baozhang shijiao” [Space-Based Silk Road Supports the Strategic Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative: A Perspective of Military Security Guarantees], *Journal of International Security Studies*, no. 3 (2016): 73–89. According to He, “in order to understand the dangers and threats, including to military security, that occur along the ‘Belt and Road,’ it is necessary to rely on space-based reconnaissance satellites.”

<sup>62</sup> In addition, He recommends that China consider developing space-based ground-attack capabilities and increasing the number of medium- and long-range missiles in its inventory to ensure that it will have the ability to respond rapidly to potential military threats.

<sup>63</sup> He, “Tian ji si lu zhu tui ‘Yidai Yilu’ zhanlüe shishi.”

<sup>64</sup> Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>65</sup> He, “Tian ji si lu zhu tui ‘Yidai Yilu’ zhanlüe shishi.”

catchall phrase,” one that China seems to be applying to a wide range of unrelated endeavors.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, according to Wu Wenyuan, “engineered in a top-down fashion and reflecting political rhetoric, the Digital Silk Road ignores institutional weaknesses in underdeveloped partner countries.”<sup>67</sup> For example, “rampant corruption” in many BRI countries, such as Bangladesh, Kenya, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe, will likely create major problems. As a result, Wu argues, Chinese companies may find that their investments will not work out as they had hoped.<sup>68</sup>

### *Implications for the United States and Its Allies and Partners*

China’s incorporation of space and cyberspace into BRI could have important implications for the economic and security interests of the United States and its allies and partners. Even if China is only partially successful in implementing the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor and the Digital Silk Road, they could help Beijing expand its influence, potentially at the expense of the economic and security interests of the United States. Indeed, analysts are already expressing concerns about the possibility that the initiatives could increase economic dependence on China in ways that give Beijing even greater leverage over participating countries. The growing reliance of these countries on technology provided by Chinese companies with close ties to the PLA and Chinese intelligence agencies could also exacerbate security risks.

Malcolm Davis assesses that countries participating in China’s space information corridor initiatives will “become dependent on Chinese-provided space services.”<sup>69</sup> As a result, China’s regional influence is likely to grow as BRI countries become increasingly reliant on Chinese space systems for important applications related to economic growth and national security. The development of the corridor could also lead to the establishment of Chinese space facilities in participating countries. China has already established space-related facilities overseas. In December 2016, Beijing opened the China Remote Sensing Satellite North Polar Ground Station in Kiruna, Sweden.<sup>70</sup> In addition, as mentioned above, it has established a satellite ground station in the Patagonia region of Argentina.<sup>71</sup> New ground stations could be relevant to various aspects of China’s space program, but they could also enhance the PLA’s C4ISR capabilities (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance). Indeed, C4ISR is an important area of emphasis of China’s ongoing military reforms, as reflected in the establishment of the PLA Strategic Support Force to oversee space and network warfare capabilities.

The Digital Silk Road raises what could be even more serious concerns. China’s influence could allow Beijing to promote preferred standards in ways that would give Chinese state-owned and private companies important commercial advantages. It could also leverage the involvement of these Chinese companies in the construction of information infrastructure and communications networks for the purpose of collecting intelligence. As Nyshka Chandran observes, participating

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<sup>66</sup> Brown, “Beijing’s Silk Road Goes Digital.”

<sup>67</sup> Wu, “China’s Digital Silk Road.”

<sup>68</sup> According to Wu, “the deficiencies inherent in politicizing investment are magnified by weak governance, corruption and counterproductive regulations in Silk Road countries. Barring a course correction, neither Beijing nor its partners will see the economic returns they are hoping for.” See Wu, “China’s Digital Silk Road.”

<sup>69</sup> Malcolm Davis, “The Coming of China’s Space Silk Road,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, August 11, 2017, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/coming-chinas-space-silk-road>.

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Chen, “China Launches Its First Fully Owned Overseas Satellite Ground Station Near North Pole,” *South China Morning Post*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2055224/china-launches-its-first-fully-owned-overseas-satellite>.

<sup>71</sup> Ernesto Londoño, “From a Space Station in Argentina, China Expands Its Reach in Latin America,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/world/americas/china-latin-america.html>.

countries could benefit from the development of new communications networks, but “many fear Beijing could use those tools for electronic surveillance.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the expansion of Chinese infrastructure and networks could be accompanied by an increase in Chinese capabilities for intelligence collection—and perhaps network disruption—along the Digital Silk Road. It could also extend the reach of the Chinese intelligence services’ attempts to locate individuals or follow behavior patterns beyond China’s borders.<sup>73</sup> Finally, Chinese internet sovereignty concepts and content control capabilities could influence some BRI countries to adopt policy positions favorable to China and to enhance their own domestic surveillance and censorship capabilities.

The United States and its allies and partners have a number of options for responding to these challenges. With respect to space services, the United States and some of its key allies enjoy important advantages in large part because of their dynamic commercial space industries. This gives them a strong foundation to compete with China by offering to provide innovative capabilities in areas such as navigation and positioning, communications, remote sensing, and reusable launch to BRI countries as an alternative to reliance on Chinese space systems. As for offering alternatives to Chinese ICT companies, the United States and allies such as Japan and Australia could encourage their own ICT companies to increase their investments in key BRI countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and promote cybersecurity partnerships.

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<sup>72</sup> Chandran, “Surveillance Fears Cloud China’s ‘Digital Silk Road.’”

<sup>73</sup> The author thanks a commentator at the NBR workshop for raising these points.

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# The Dawn of a PLA Expeditionary Force?

*Kristen Gunness*

**KRISTEN GUNNESS** is Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Vantage Point Asia, LLC. She can be reached at <[kristen.gunness@vantagepointasia.com](mailto:kristen.gunness@vantagepointasia.com)>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the linkage between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's development of military expeditionary capabilities and assesses the challenges that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) faces in building an expeditionary force capable of securing BRI investments and protecting Chinese citizens overseas.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The PLA has been developing expeditionary military capabilities for over a decade, driven by China's expanding global footprint. BRI adds to the security and operational challenges the PLA will encounter and increases the urgency to develop an expeditionary force capable of flexible and sustained deployment overseas. Potential contingencies along the Belt and Road routes include border skirmishes, maritime incidents, regional or host country unrest, and attacks on infrastructure. The PLA faces a range of challenges as it develops expeditionary capabilities to prepare for these contingencies, including the lack of trained personnel; insufficient command, control, and coordination of expeditionary missions, both within the PLA and with other countries' forces; and the need for long-range logistics.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Given that the PLA had already been focused on improving its expeditionary capabilities, BRI does not appear to have changed the overall trajectory of its expeditionary force development.
- The PLA's focus on far-seas maritime capabilities likely means that its ability to conduct missions for BRI contingencies with a maritime component is more developed than its ability to conduct land-based missions. The PLA has not yet had to undertake a sustained deployment of ground forces overseas and would be challenged by a land-based contingency.
- The PLA will likely be faced with non-maritime contingencies in the future, particularly along its borders, which could lead it to augment its border security capabilities.
- Areas for expeditionary force improvement include personnel and command training, the development of better-connected logistics systems, and greater emphasis on the coordination of forces overseas through bureaucratic structures and the new theater command structure.



China's interests beyond East Asia—which include protecting the millions of Chinese citizens living abroad, preserving access to energy resources, and securing critical shipping lanes—increasingly require the development of an expeditionary military force that goes beyond the current abilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>1</sup> Chinese military operations outside East Asia have been relatively limited to date; however, the PLA is steadily improving its expeditionary capabilities and has engaged in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), noncombatant evacuation operations (NEOs), counterpiracy operations, and peacekeeping missions.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has increased the strategic and operational security challenges for the PLA. The PLA's expeditionary capabilities are considered by most Western analysts to be incipient but growing. Despite significant improvements in overseas capabilities over the past decade, particularly in the maritime realm, the PLA is still somewhat limited in the sustained use of its expeditionary force, particularly for larger or more complex operations far from China's shores. As BRI evolves, the potential for overseas security concerns to require Chinese military presence or capabilities will increase, raising the question of how the PLA will choose to shape its expeditionary capabilities.

To explore the answer to that question, this essay first examines the key drivers of PLA expeditionary capabilities and their connection to BRI. The next two sections then discuss potential BRI contingencies and the expeditionary capabilities that the PLA currently has with which to address them. The essay ends with an assessment of the challenges that the PLA faces with its expeditionary force development, potential areas of improvement, and implications.

## BRI and the Drivers of PLA Expeditionary Capabilities

In order to fully examine how BRI is affecting the development of the PLA's expeditionary capabilities, we must first look at the drivers of those capabilities and their connection to BRI. The drivers are fourfold: the “China dream,” which envisions the revitalization of the country as a great power; China's expanding involvement in international affairs; increased pressure on China to be a provider of security for the international community; and domestic expectations for the protection of Chinese citizens and interests abroad.<sup>2</sup>

### *The China Dream*

Xi Jinping has outlined a vision for China's revitalization as a great power, referred to as the China dream. This dream lays out policy objectives to ensure economic prosperity, social stability, and an overall higher quality of life for citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It also contains policy objectives related to expanding the country's national power, including

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<sup>1</sup> In 2004, Hu Jintao announced the “new historic missions” rubric, which for the first time officially articulated China's need to develop capabilities to protect overseas interests. The need to develop an overseas military capability was more recently articulated in China's 2015 national defense white paper. See State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *China's Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content\\_4586805.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of the domestic drivers of PLA expeditionary capabilities, see Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, “A Global People's Liberation Army: Possibilities, Challenges, and Opportunities,” *Asia Policy*, no. 22 (2016): 131–55.

modernizing the military and shaping the international environment.<sup>3</sup> This vision includes a high degree of economic integration through initiatives such as BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, proposed regional free trade agreements, and the development of expeditionary military capabilities to protect overseas investments.<sup>4</sup>

### *Expanding Involvement in International Affairs*

As China expands its economic profile, its involvement in international security affairs has also grown, reflecting an increasing willingness on the part of the PRC leadership to use the country's economic and political influence to shape the international security environment. But China's ability to do so is at least partially predicated on the maintenance of a strong military that can be anywhere at any time and can stay indefinitely. It also requires a greater willingness to use that military should the need arise. China's expanding international engagement thus requires the capacity for flexible deployment and a sustained military presence.

There are some recent examples of PRC leaders sending the PLA into longer-term dangerous or unstable situations in areas overseas where China has significant interests or wants to shape outcomes. For example, in 2015 the PLA for the first time deployed troops for peacekeeping operations in South Sudan, an area where China has energy interests and political influence. The deployment has so far resulted in several tense standoffs and the death of at least two PLA soldiers. Despite this, China has remained a significant participant in UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, contributing the largest number of forces among the permanent members of the UN Security Council and funding around 10% of the peacekeeping operation budget in 2018.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the PLA built its first overseas military base in Djibouti, which Chinese officials say will provide a logistics hub for PLA counterpiracy missions and UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> However, the PLA has permanently stationed a Marine Corps unit at the base, and PLA troops have engaged in exercises to defend and protect Chinese facilities. For example, in 2017, troops conducted several live-fire drills in the surrounding desert to "explore a new training model for Chinese overseas garrisons," which require military protection.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, the PLA conducted a series of exercises aimed at "training for counter-terrorism and defense."<sup>8</sup> These examples illustrate how the PLA is investing in the capabilities necessary to protect China's interests and shape the security environment overseas through sustained military presence at

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<sup>3</sup> These goals were reiterated in Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Party Congress. See "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm). For a comprehensive discussion of the China dream, see Timothy R. Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> "Xi Jinping chuxi zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua" [Speech by Xi Jinping at the Central Meeting on Foreign Affairs Work], Xinhua, November 29, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c\\_1113457723.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-11/29/c_1113457723.htm); and "Xi Jinping: Jianchi zongti guojia anquan guan, zou Zhongguo tese guojia anquan daolu" [Xi Jinping: Commit to a Grand National Security Concept, a Roadmap for National Security with Chinese Characteristics], Xinhua, April 14, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-04/15/c\\_1110253910.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm). In July 2015 the National People's Congress passed a wide-ranging security law that tasked the PLA with protecting China's overseas interests.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments of the People's Republic of China 2019* (Washington, D.C., 2019), 26, [https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019\\_CHINA\\_MILITARY\\_POWER\\_REPORT.pdf](https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf); and Kristin Huang, "Chinese Peacekeepers in Tense Stand-off with Armed Militants in South Sudan," *South China Morning Post*, January 6, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2127140/chinese-peacekeepers-tense-stand-armed-militants-south>.

<sup>6</sup> "China's Djibouti Base Not for Military Expansion," Xinhua, July 13, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/13/c\\_136441371.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/13/c_136441371.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Minnie Chan, "Drill Shows Chinese Troops Capable of Riding Shotgun on Country's Global Ambitions," *South China Morning Post*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2122473/drills-show-chinese-troops-capable-riding-shotgun>.

<sup>8</sup> "Claims China Turning Djibouti Base into Military Foothold 'Groundless,'" *Global Times*, May 17, 2018, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-05/17/content\\_8034457.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-05/17/content_8034457.htm).

permanent facilities, such as the base in Djibouti, and continued investment in peacekeeping operations and counterpiracy missions.

### *Increased Pressure to Be a Provider of Security for the International Community*

Xi Jinping has publicly stated that the military should play a pivotal role in “the maintenance of international security affairs” and try its best to provide more “public security products to the international community.”<sup>9</sup> This direction is also apparent in official BRI documents. For example, a 2017 document outlined efforts to build new maritime routes and connections, which presumably bring security issues that China would take part in mitigating, such as piracy and drug trafficking.<sup>10</sup> Another aspect of China’s growth as a global power includes the provision of aid to other nations and their citizens when called upon—for example, during natural disasters or conflicts. This has led the PLA to further develop its HADR capabilities, such as through deployment of the hospital ship *Peace Ark* around the globe.<sup>11</sup>

### *Domestic Expectations for the Protection of Chinese Citizens and Interests Abroad*

The Chinese public increasingly expects the PLA to protect PRC citizens when an incident occurs overseas, and these expectations are creating greater pressure on the government to send the military abroad. The PLA has been caught off guard in past situations where Chinese citizens were in danger, such as when unrest swept Libya in 2011 and Chinese oil companies were attacked. The PLA’s lack of preparation for such a contingency forced the government to dispatch civilian assets—including charter flights, transport ships, and fishing boats—to rescue its citizens.<sup>12</sup> As BRI projects send more PRC citizens to vulnerable or unstable communities in Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the pressure on the PLA to provide capable protection will only increase.

PRC leaders have so far managed domestic expectations by continuing to encourage PLA involvement in multilateral efforts such as counterterrorism, counterpiracy, or UN peacekeeping operations. China also publicizes the capabilities of the PLA by reporting on its participation in military operations such as NEOs—for example, in 2015 in Yemen—and highlighting exercises and deployments that demonstrate its naval and air capabilities in the distant seas.<sup>13</sup> These efforts are combined with the increased use of private security companies for protection and coordination with the host nation for security support.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Xi Jinping jieshou *Huaerjie Ribao* caifang” [Xi Jinping Interview with the *Wall Street Journal*], Xinhua, September 22, 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/22/c\\_1116642032.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/22/c_1116642032.htm).

<sup>10</sup> “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” Xinhua, June 20, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c\\_136380414.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm).

<sup>11</sup> “PLA Navy’s Hospital Ship *Peace Ark* Sets Sail for ‘Harmonious Mission 2018,’” China Military Online, June 29, 2018, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-06/29/content\\_4818110.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-06/29/content_4818110.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Geoff Dyer and Leslie Hook, “Chinese Oil Interests Attacked in Libya,” *Financial Times*, February 24, 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/eef58d52-3fe2-11e0-811f-00144feabd0>.

<sup>13</sup> For articles in the Chinese press discussing the PLA Navy’s “distant seas” deployments and combat training, see Qian Xiaohu and Gao Yi, “Nanhai jianhui yuanhai xunlian biandui jinru Xi Taipingyang jixu kaizhan shizhan hua xunlian” [The Distant Sea Training Formation of the South Sea Fleet Sailed into the Waters of the Western Pacific Ocean and Continued to Carry Out Combat Realistic Training], Ministry of National Defense (PRC), February 3, 2014, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/hdpic/2014-02/04/content\\_4488353.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/hdpic/2014-02/04/content_4488353.htm); and Qian Xiaohu, Gao Yi, and Gan Jun, “Li bing liang dayang—Haijun xin niandu shouci zhanbei xunluo yuanhai xunlian lueying” [Sharpening the Troops in Two Oceans—Scenes During the Navy’s First High Seas War Preparedness Patrol Training of the New Year], Ministry of National Defense (PRC), February 19, 2014, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/photo/2014-02/19/content\\_4491168\\_5.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/photo/2014-02/19/content_4491168_5.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “Securing China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Dimensions and Implications,” testimony before the U.S.-China Security and Economic Review Commission, January 25, 2018, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Wuthnow\\_USCC%20Testimony\\_20180123.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Wuthnow_USCC%20Testimony_20180123.pdf). For further discussion of China’s use of private security companies in connection with BRI, see Meia Nouwens, “China’s Use of Private Security Companies and Other Actors to Secure the Belt and Road across South Asia,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 2 (2019): 13–20.

## BRI Contingencies

Although the imperative for the PLA to build military expeditionary capabilities has been present for quite some time, BRI has heightened the operational and strategic security risks to Chinese interests and increased the urgency for the PLA to further develop these capabilities. The preceding section identified four drivers of this trend. The following section discusses the contingencies that the PLA is most likely to face given potential BRI investments.

### *Border Security*

With fourteen neighbors, China has the most land borders of any country in the world.<sup>15</sup> Despite the government's focus on resolving disputes, several of these borders are still flashpoints for potential crises. In 2017, for example, China and India nearly came to blows along the border at Doklam in the Himalayas. Though conflict was avoided, the border remains tense and is an area of potential conflict.<sup>16</sup> The border with North Korea also remains a concern for Beijing because of the potential for refugees to enter China should North Korea become unstable. For decades, the Sino-Russian border was also fraught with conflict—the two sides nearly fought a war in 1969 over the border—until an agreement in 2008 finally resolved the dispute.<sup>17</sup> These are just a few examples of how border security has been a top priority for decades. To address this threat, the PLA has focused on honing its capabilities to conduct border protection in remote or harsh environments, such as in Xinjiang or along the Sino-Indian border, both of which have been sites of high-altitude training.<sup>18</sup>

BRI is slated to expand economic ties with some of the most unstable countries on China's near periphery, including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in Central Asia and Pakistan and Afghanistan in South Asia. The government's heightened concern over border security in those areas is reflected in PLA training exercises over the past several years, such as joint border security exercises with Tajikistan focused on terrorism on the Tajik-Afghan border.<sup>19</sup> Chinese security analysts also discuss the possibility that the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan could spill into Xinjiang, and there have been reports of "joint law enforcement" patrols along the China-Afghan border.<sup>20</sup> The border with Pakistan is also a concern because the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a cornerstone of BRI.

### *Maritime Security*

As it expands its maritime footprint abroad, China must also consider the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs), maritime trade routes, and overseas ports and bases. The new

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<sup>15</sup> China borders North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye, and Nilanthi Samaranyake, "Doklam One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas," *War on the Rocks*, June 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/doklam-one-year-later-chinas-long-game-in-the-himalayas>.

<sup>17</sup> Li Xiaokun, "China, Russia Sign Border Agreement," *China Daily*, July 22, 2008, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-07/22/content\\_6865847.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-07/22/content_6865847.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Zhang Han, "PLA Xinjiang Troops Upgrade Training to Boost Counter-terror, Border Patrol Efforts," *Global Times*, November 12, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1127007.shtml>; and "PLA Holds High-Altitude Drill on Plateau in Tibet," *Global Times*, June 29, 2018, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/29/content\\_8074859.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/29/content_8074859.htm).

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Putz, "Sino-Tajik Counterterrorism Drills Reflect China's Regional Concerns," *Diplomat*, October 21, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/sino-tajik-counterterrorism-drills-reflect-chinas-regional-concerns>.

<sup>20</sup> This finding is based on the author's conversations with Chinese academics and think-tank experts; and Ministry of National Defense (PRC), Press Conference, February 23, 2017, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2017-02/24/content\\_4773551.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2017-02/24/content_4773551.htm). Defense officials did not deny the military patrols along the Afghan border, though they did deny that Chinese military vehicles entered Afghanistan to conduct the patrols.

“maritime Silk Road” passes through regional hotspots such as the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait, the Bay of Bengal, and the North Sea.<sup>21</sup> The opening of these trade routes exposes China to attendant security concerns that require increased expeditionary capabilities to conduct operations such as SLOC protection and counterpiracy.

While security at Chinese-operated ports has so far been handled by a combination of local security forces and private security companies, as BRI expands China’s presence in the maritime realm, the PRC will likely attempt to negotiate agreements to rely more on its own military capabilities.<sup>22</sup> This might include establishing agreements for preferred access to overseas commercial ports and a limited number of PLA logistic facilities collocated with those ports.<sup>23</sup> With respect to the security of overseas bases, as mentioned above, the PLA Marine Corps already has a contingent stationed at the base in Djibouti, which could be used for protection of the facility in the event of an attack. More permanently stationed forces could follow if China expands its military footprint through the development of new bases in countries friendly to China and with similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan.

### *Local or Regional Unrest and Conflict*

Even prior to BRI, China has had to confront local unrest and conflicts that threaten its investments in some of the world’s most dangerous regions. Some of this unrest has resulted in the kidnapping and death of Chinese citizens and threats to Chinese-owned facilities. For example, in 2018 the Ugandan military was ordered to protect Chinese companies following a spate of robberies that cost Chinese investors significant sums of money.<sup>24</sup> In 2015, two Chinese diplomats were shot to death in the Philippines, and that same year seven Chinese nationals were among the 170 hostages taken in Mali.<sup>25</sup>

So far, the PRC has responded either by relying on local security forces to protect citizens or, in some cases, by paying the necessary parties to ensure the safety of kidnapped citizens. However, there already have been circumstances requiring a larger military response, such as the widespread unrest in Yemen in 2015 that compelled the PLA to conduct an NEO to evacuate more than five hundred citizens of various countries.<sup>26</sup> As China’s presence expands in areas prone to unrest or conflict, more of these situations could occur on an even larger scale. The PLA has focused efforts on improving its capacity to conduct NEOs through the acquisition of better-equipped surface ships and more capabilities for at-sea replenishment.

### *Protection of Infrastructure*

Many BRI investments are in infrastructure (e.g., factories, pipelines, railways, and roadways). These types of facilities have so far been protected by local security forces and increasingly by

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<sup>21</sup> For a map of the various land and maritime routes proposed by BRI, see “How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China’s Interests?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, China Power, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>22</sup> The 2019 version of the U.S. Department of Defense’s annual report on Chinese military power notes that international reports stated that in 2018 China sought to expand its military basing and access in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the western Pacific, though it was constrained by the “willingness of host countries to support a PLA presence.” U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2019, 16.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China’s Expanding Global Access,” December 2018, 4, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/14/2002079292/-1/-1/1/EXPANDING-GLOBAL-ACCESS-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>24</sup> “Uganda Orders Military to Protect Chinese Businesses,” BBC, November 15, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46221236>.

<sup>25</sup> Gunness and Mastro, “A Global People’s Liberation Army,” 142.

<sup>26</sup> Ankit Panda, “Chinese Nationals Evacuates Foreign Nationals from Yemen,” *Diplomat*, April 6, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/china-evacuates-foreign-nationals-from-yemen>.

private security companies.<sup>27</sup> However, should the threat grow too large for the host country to handle, the PLA might try to negotiate agreements to send in its own military forces or join security forces with the host country to protect vulnerable or important infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines.

## Current PLA Expeditionary Capabilities for Addressing BRI Contingencies

The following section examines the expeditionary capabilities that the PLA would likely use to address the above BRI contingencies. They are organized by sea, air, and land power capabilities.

### *Expeditionary Sea Power*

The PLA Navy's expeditionary capabilities are useful for addressing a range of BRI contingencies, including threats to SLOCs, maritime trade routes, and overseas bases and port facilities. They can also be used in the event of host-country unrest or conflict. Many of the maritime capabilities that would be used for BRI contingencies already have been developed or even deployed in a limited fashion—for example, during the NEOs in Libya and Yemen or the counterpiracy task forces in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>28</sup> However, the PLA's focus on the maritime domain means that these capabilities are constantly being upgraded, improved, or produced in greater numbers. In addition, China's base in Djibouti will allow the PLA Navy to have a sustained presence overseas. These improvements suggest that the PLA likely will be able to conduct at least limited sustained maritime operations overseas in the 2025–30 time period. Expeditionary sea-power capabilities include surface combatants, the Marine Corps, amphibious warfare ships, aircraft carriers, and a hospital ship.

*Surface combatants.* Surface combatants include the new guided-missile destroyers (DDG) and guided-missile frigates (FFG). These substantially increase the PLA Navy's air-defense, anti-ship, and antisubmarine capabilities and are critical to its ability to expand maritime operations overseas. There are currently 7 Luyang III-class DDGs (Type 052D) deployed, with an estimated 6 more under construction.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the PLA has 24 Jiangkai II-class FFGs (Type 054A), which have been used in counterpiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden and in the NEO in Libya in 2011.<sup>30</sup> China is also constructing the Type 055 Renhai-class guided-missile cruiser. When deployed, it reportedly will be Asia's largest destroyer and be included in aircraft carrier battle group formations.<sup>31</sup>

*Marine Corps.* The PLA Navy is expanding the Marine Corps from two brigades and approximately 10,000 personnel to seven brigades with potentially more than 30,000 personnel

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<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth discussion on China's use of private security companies overseas, see Timothy R. Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Interests* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2271.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2271.html).

<sup>28</sup> The PLA has conducted counterpiracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden since 2009.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Washington, D.C., 2018), 29, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>.

<sup>30</sup> Morgan Clemens, Gabe Collins, and Kristen Gunness, "The Type 054/054A Frigate Series: China's Most Produced and Deployed Large Modern Surface Combatant," *China SignPost*, August 2, 2015, <http://www.chinasignpost.com/2015/08/02/the-type-054054a-frigate-series-chinas-most-produced-and-deployed-large-modern-surface-combatant>.

<sup>31</sup> Tan Yusheng, "A Review of the Chinese Navy's Equipment Development in 2017," *Jianchuan Zhishi*, January 18, 2018, 62–73.

by 2020.<sup>32</sup> The intent appears to be to increasingly use Marine Corps forces for expeditionary missions. A contingent is already stationed at the PLA's base in Djibouti, and training is ongoing for the protection of port facilities.<sup>33</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Defense, a newly established Marine Corps headquarters is responsible for "manning, training, and equipping the expanded Marine Corps and, for the first time, the PLANMC has its own commander, although it is still subordinate to the PLAN."<sup>34</sup>

*Amphibious warfare ships.* The PLA Navy is building up its amphibious ship force to augment expeditionary warfare, HADR, and counterpiracy capabilities. These include four Yuzhao-class (Type 071) amphibious transport docks (LPD), which provide increased capability for long-range operations. Two more LPDs are reportedly under construction.<sup>35</sup>

*Aircraft carriers.* China commissioned the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier in 2012 and has three domestically built ships in various stages of testing or construction.<sup>36</sup> Although the PLA has yet to conduct full carrier operations, it has been making progress toward that goal. In 2018 the PLA Navy launched a series of exercises on carrier group tactics in the South China Sea that featured the *Liaoning*.<sup>37</sup> According to Chinese media, modifications to its flight deck and propulsion system, along with intensive personnel training, mean that the *Liaoning* could potentially be used in combat in the near future.<sup>38</sup> There are also signs that China's first domestically built carrier, the Type 001A, which conducted sea trials in 2018, will soon be commissioned.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that the *Liaoning* will join the PLA Navy's fleet in 2019 and that the domestically built carrier will be operational by 2022.<sup>40</sup>

*Hospital ship.* The PLA's hospital ship the *Peace Ark* deploys around the globe and provides HADR medical capabilities. The ship, for example, deployed to Latin America in June 2018 on the Harmonious Mission 2018.<sup>41</sup>

### *Expeditionary Air Power*

The PLA Air Force's expeditionary capabilities are currently limited and focused on carrying out specific overseas missions. These capabilities have mainly been used for HADR missions or multilateral exercises, but they also could be used to assist the PLA Navy with NEOs or to conduct border security operations as the capabilities improve.<sup>42</sup> Like the other military services,

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2018, 28.

<sup>33</sup> "PLA Marine Corps Conducts Massive Groundbreaking Maneuvers," *Global Times*, March 16, 2018, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/16/content\\_7974447.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/16/content_7974447.htm).

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2018, 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ben Westcott and Brad Lendon, "China's First Homegrown Carrier Heads Out for Sea Trial," CNN, May 14, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/12/asia/china-aircraft-carrier-trial-intl/index.html>.

<sup>37</sup> "China's Aircraft Carrier Formation Conducts Exercises in the South China Sea," Xinhua, April 17, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/17/c\\_137117997.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/17/c_137117997.htm).

<sup>38</sup> "Role of Aircraft Carrier Liaoning Shifts from Training to Combat," *Global Times*, April 25, 2019, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-04/25/content\\_9488581.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-04/25/content_9488581.htm).

<sup>39</sup> "China Soon to Commission 1st Homemade Aircraft Carrier," *Global Times*, May 15, 2019, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/15/content\\_9503524.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-05/15/content_9503524.htm); and Zhao Lei, "World-Class PLA Navy Is Emerging," *China Daily*, April 23, 2019, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/23/WS5cbe0a6ea3104842260b79d9.html>.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2019, 29.

<sup>41</sup> "PLA Navy's Hospital Ship *Peace Ark* Sets Sail for Harmonious Mission 2018," China Military Online, June 29, 2018, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-06/29/content\\_4818110.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-06/29/content_4818110.htm).

<sup>42</sup> "Kongjun hangkongbing feichu guomen lianxun, chuandi le shenme xinxi?" [Air Force Aviation Force Flies Out into the World for Training, What News Has Been Transmitted?], China Military Online, April 9, 2016, [http://www.81.cn/syjd/2016-04/09/content\\_6998435\\_3.htm](http://www.81.cn/syjd/2016-04/09/content_6998435_3.htm).

the PLA Air Force has been hampered by a lack of facilities overseas, which China has tried to mitigate by building the military base in Djibouti. Given that the PLA's expeditionary maritime capabilities have been hampered by a lack of strategic airlifts in the past, it is likely that the air force is under pressure to support naval operations with the requisite airlift capabilities by 2025–30. Expeditionary air power capabilities include strategic airlift and airborne capabilities.

*Strategic airlift.* The main unit involved in overseas PLA Air Force operations is the 39th Regiment of the 13th Transport Division, which provides long-range transport and strategic airlift capabilities via its small fleet of Ilyushin IL-76 aircraft.<sup>43</sup> China has fielded its Y-20 large transport aircraft and the world's largest seaplane, the AG-600, which will supplement and eventually replace the IL-76.<sup>44</sup> The large transports are intended to support airborne command and control, logistics, paradrops, aerial refueling, strategic reconnaissance operations, and HADR missions, and will mostly negate the strategic airlift deficiency that had previously hampered the PLA in its missions abroad.<sup>45</sup>

*Airborne.* The PLA Air Force's 15th Airborne Corps is China's primary strategic airborne unit. Although it has mainly been used for regional missions, troops and IL-76 transport planes from the 13th Transport Division sometimes operate together, building on efforts to extend the operational range of airborne troops through paradrop operations and delivery of cargo by air.<sup>46</sup> Its overseas activities to date consisted of paradrops of troops and equipment in bilateral and multilateral exercises as well as regional HADR operations.

### *Expeditionary Land Power*

The PLA has never needed to sustain significant ground-force operations far from home. Ground forces are occasionally used during maritime operations that require the application of special operations forces and could be used in the future to provide border security, rescue hostages, or protect valuable infrastructure and facilities. However, for the PLA to truly field and sustain an expeditionary ground force would require improved logistics systems, command and control of overseas forces, and cooperation with host country or multilateral forces. The missions that the PLA conducts with the United Nations assist in training personnel in operations overseas, but only a small percentage of PLA troops participate. Given these challenges, it is unlikely that the PLA would attempt a significant ground force operation overseas before 2030.<sup>47</sup> Rather, the PLA is more likely to continue to field small pockets of ground force capabilities for discrete missions while improving its overall ability to project force inland over long distances. Expeditionary land power capabilities include special operations forces, peacekeeping troops, and border patrol forces.

*Special operations forces.* Special operations forces have mainly been involved in antiterrorism operations and border reconnaissance. They have also been deployed on a limited basis overseas,

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<sup>43</sup> Christina L. Garafola and Timothy R. Heath, *The Chinese Air Force's First Steps toward Becoming an Expeditionary Air Force* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 8.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2018, 29.

<sup>45</sup> "Chinese Large Freighter Plane Enters Military Service," Xinhua, July 7, 2016, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-07/06/content\\_25988280.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-07/06/content_25988280.htm).

<sup>46</sup> Garafola and Heath, *The Chinese Air Force's First Steps*, 10; and "Y-20's Completion of First Heavy Equipment Airdrop Is of Great Significance," China Military Online, June 12, 2018, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/12/content\\_8059912.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/12/content_8059912.htm).

<sup>47</sup> This is the author's estimate only, based on current expeditionary capabilities and the challenges associated with projecting force far inland away from China's home shores.



such as during the counterpiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>48</sup> The PLA is reportedly developing its special operations capabilities to build a more flexible and deployable force that can support missions abroad—for example, by freeing hostages or supporting counterterrorism operations with limited or no use of force. As China’s presence under BRI expands, one could imagine a scenario in which Chinese citizens are held hostage and special operations forces are called in to undertake a rescue mission. The PLA has practiced these capabilities in exercises with Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.<sup>49</sup> Special operations forces have so far been hampered, like the rest of the PLA, by a lack of strategic airlift and sealift, but the PLA is working to rectify that weakness by building more capabilities in those areas. Special operations capabilities also might improve as China’s intelligence and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) networks advance.

*Peacekeeping troops.* China currently contributes 10% of the UN peacekeeping budget and has trained eight thousand PLA troops “to serve as a permanent standby militia for UN peacekeeping operations.”<sup>50</sup> PLA peacekeeping troops are primarily deployed to Africa, where China’s energy interests dictate a concern for stability and security. However, these missions provide valuable training that can be used in future expeditionary missions elsewhere in the world.

*Border patrol forces.* The PLA deploys forces along several of China’s borders, including those with India, North Korea, and Pakistan.<sup>51</sup> The troops along the border with Pakistan help secure the area from terrorist threats (namely from ISIS) and prevent Uighur Muslims from leaving Xinjiang to join ISIS.<sup>52</sup> According to Chinese reporting, these border troops are under the Xinjiang Military Command, which falls under the Western Theater Command.<sup>53</sup> Although currently only a small subset of the ground forces is deployed along these borders, the PLA might be forced to increase its border-patrol capacity given CPEC and other BRI investments in Pakistan, the threat of terrorism along the border with Xinjiang, and concern over the border with Afghanistan.

### *Space-Based Capabilities*

The PLA’s space-based capabilities enable military operations abroad and are relevant to all BRI contingencies. These include C4ISR and network connectivity, both of which are crucial to the PLA’s ability to command forces over long distances and provide the required logistics support for overseas operations. The PLA continues to invest in improving its capabilities in C4ISR, satellite communication, satellite navigation, and meteorology, which would provide real-time data and intelligence support for expeditionary forces overseas. These space-based capabilities are supported by infrastructure on the ground that ensures network connectivity.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For example, about 70 PLA Navy special operations forces personnel have deployed with each of the nineteen maritime task forces sent to the Gulf of Aden to conduct escort missions since 2008. Dennis J. Blasko, “Chinese Special Operations Forces: Not Like Back at Bragg,” *War on the Rocks*, January 1, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/01/chinese-special-operations-forces-not-like-back-at-bragg>.

<sup>49</sup> Yang Qingmin and Xu Chunlong, “PLA Army Conducts First Assessment of Its Special Operations Forces,” *China Military Online*, July 17, 2018, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-07/17/content\\_4819487.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-07/17/content_4819487.htm); Dennis Blasko, “SOF a Priority in China,” *Cipher Brief*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/sof-a-priority-in-china>; and Cai Wenbo and Li Liang, “Chinese, Belarusian Special Operations Forces Conclude Joint Training,” *China Military Online*, August 20, 2018, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-08/20/content\\_9257988.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-08/20/content_9257988.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Logan Pauley, “China Takes the Lead in UN Peacekeeping,” *Diplomat*, April 17, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/china-takes-the-lead-in-un-peacekeeping>.

<sup>51</sup> Shan Jie and Huang Jingjing, “PLA Border Troops Fortified,” *Global Times*, August 1, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1058947.shtml>.

<sup>52</sup> “China, Pakistan Troops Launch First Joint Border Patrol Near Xinjiang,” *Times of India*, July 21, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/China-Pakistan-troops-launch-first-joint-border-patrol-near-Xinjiang/articleshow/53321172.cms>.

<sup>53</sup> “China, Pakistan Conduct Joint Border Patrol,” *China Military Online*, July 4, 2018, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-07/04/content\\_8079676\\_2.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-07/04/content_8079676_2.htm).

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2019, 49.

## Challenges and Implications

The final section of this essay discusses the challenges that the PLA faces, given both its current expeditionary capabilities and possible contingencies related to BRI, and considers potential areas of improvement in those capabilities.

### *Challenges*

Key challenges for the PLA in addressing BRI contingencies include personnel and training; command, control, and coordination; and logistics.

*Personnel and training.* The PLA has worked to inject more realism into its training regimen and hone the skills necessary for long-term naval and air deployments abroad. For example, Chinese literature discusses the PLA Navy's training in the South China Sea in 2017, which focused on "far seas" (beyond East Asia) training staged from the Sanya Training Base. The exercises mainly occurred in the South China Sea and included a DDG, a supply ship, shipborne helicopters, and dozens of marines. The training focused on honing skills for a number of expeditionary missions, such as escort missions, antiterrorism, counterpiracy, and maritime defense in the South China Sea, the eastern Indian Ocean, and the western Pacific Ocean.<sup>55</sup> In 2018 the PLA marines stationed at Djibouti conducted a long-distance maneuver exercise, deploying approximately ten thousand personnel. The exercise was likely aimed at improving expeditionary warfare capabilities training for various terrains and climates.<sup>56</sup>

Despite improved training, when it comes to expeditionary missions, the PLA is still essentially "learning while doing." Though missions such as counterpiracy in the Gulf of Aden and peacekeeping in Africa provide valuable experience, only a relatively small number of troops and commanders have deployed on missions abroad. Although deployments by the Marine Corps to Djibouti will help augment the PLA's overseas experience, many of these expeditionary capabilities will be tested for the first time during a crisis. In terms of BRI contingencies, lack of experience and training could hamper the PLA should it need to conduct a sustained operation to protect Chinese citizens and investments from unrest in a host country or conduct a large-scale NEO to rescue Chinese nationals.

*Command, control, and coordination.* Command, control, and coordination of expeditionary missions is another major challenge that the PLA faces. This challenge is threefold. First, the PLA's extensive reorganization is ongoing and leads to questions of how and by what (i.e., which theater command) command of overseas missions will be carried out. The answer is yet unknown, though one could speculate that the command authority might be based on the contingency and the force capabilities needed to address it. For example, the Western Theater Command focuses on India, border patrol, and counterterrorism missions. This could be the theater command that would coordinate security for BRI investments in Pakistan, where terrorism is a concern, should the PLA need to secure facilities and protect citizens. The Western Theater Command also has

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<sup>55</sup> Wu Yonghua, "Big Battles of Offense and Defense Staged Together as Navy Uses Sanya Training Base to Organize Continuous 36-Hour Double-Blind Opposing-Forces Training Exercise," *Renmin Haijun*, June 17, 2015, 3; Ministry of National Defense (PRC), "PLA Navy to Conduct Far-Sea Training," February 13, 2017, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2017-02/13/content\\_4772388.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2017-02/13/content_4772388.htm); and Jiu Yongyan, Wang Dong, and Wang Keman, "The Ship *Kunming* of a Destroyer Flotilla Writes a Glorious Chapter in Its Voyage on the Deep Blue Sea," *Renmin Haijun*, May 9, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> "PLA Marine Corps Conducts Massive Groundbreaking Maneuvers," *Global Times*, March 16, 2018, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/16/content\\_7974447.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-03/16/content_7974447.htm).

authority over border patrol troops should they be needed—for example, to secure China’s border with Afghanistan.

Second, the tyranny of distance leads to issues of communication and decision-making during expeditionary missions. Although after 28 deployments the PLA appears to have ironed out command and control issues with its counterpiracy task forces, largely trusting the commanders to make decisions while deployed without checking back with Beijing, military leaders might not trust the ability and willingness of a commander in charge of a larger force abroad to make autonomous decisions in complex situations. Better training and more experience, along with improved C4ISR and ground-based networks, will also aid the PLA in this regard.

Third, the PLA needs a means of coordinating expeditionary missions and troops abroad, as well as ensuring that political requirements and China’s interests are considered. Beijing has begun to put bureaucratic structures in place to address this issue. In 2016, Chinese media reported that the PRC had established the Overseas Operations Office, which was described as being “responsible for directing and coordinating actions carried out by Chinese troops overseas.” The article states: “The ‘Overseas Operations Office’ not only requires ‘operational commanding capabilities,’ but also ‘policy capacity.’ Policy capacity refers to the ability to grasp the national security situation and bilateral relations. For example, the evacuation operation in Yemen required the assessment [of the] local security situation and diplomatic access to enter the port of Aden.”<sup>57</sup>

In addition to coordinating its own forces, the PLA will have to coordinate with the host country’s forces and government. While the Overseas Operations Office might assist with this, much of this coordination likely will occur on the ground. For PLA troops participating in peacekeeping operations, coordination takes place under the auspices of the United Nations. In Central Asia, coordination likely would occur through the Shanghai Security Organization or through China’s bilateral relationship with Russia. However, if China plans to station more troops abroad in other areas—which is likely if the PLA follows its base in Djibouti with more overseas bases—the PRC increasingly will need to coordinate with host countries.

*Logistics.* Logistics for expeditionary missions is another challenge that the PLA is taking measures to mitigate. As previously mentioned, PLA forces on long-term and long-distance deployments have been hampered by inadequate airlift and sealift capabilities, as well as, in the case of the PLA Navy, by insufficient capacity for at-sea replenishment. However, the PLA is working to bridge this capability gap by significantly increasing the number of commissioned replenishment ships and Y-20 aircraft, which can conduct aerial refueling.<sup>58</sup> China’s naval base in Djibouti will assist the PLA with logistics for future expeditionary missions by providing a permanent hub for supplies necessary to sustain long-term naval operations. In addition, China could try to negotiate agreements with countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka to secure future military access to ports. The PLA also established the Joint Logistics Support Force in 2016 to unify logistics between the services and support the new theater command structure. Key for expeditionary missions, the Joint Logistics Support Force is undergirded by an integrated C4ISR system and aims to modernize the PLA’s strategic delivery capability.<sup>59</sup> However, like most of the PLA’s expeditionary

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<sup>57</sup> “PLA Sets Up Overseas Operations Office to Strengthen Overseas Rapid Reaction,” China Military Online, March 25, 2016, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content\\_6977517.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content_6977517.htm).

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress*, 2018, 65.

<sup>59</sup> Kevin McCauley, “China’s Military Reforms and Modernization: Implications for the United States,” testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 15, 2018, 2–4, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/McCauley\\_Written%20Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/McCauley_Written%20Testimony.pdf).

capabilities, the logistics system has not yet been tested by a contingency requiring the significant mobilization of resources far beyond China's shores.

### *Implications*

Although the PLA has been building expeditionary capabilities for more than a decade, the potential security contingencies associated with BRI have heightened the operational and security risks for China, creating greater urgency for these efforts. As we look to the future, potential implications of the PLA's development of its expeditionary force include the following:

- Current force development is still heavily weighted toward maritime capabilities. This trajectory is likely to continue in the near term, given that maritime expeditionary capabilities already have been necessary to evacuate PRC citizens (e.g., from Libya and Yemen) and likely will be needed in the future to address BRI contingencies. In addition, investments made in the PLA are still focused on regional anti-access and area-denial capabilities that include expanding China's maritime prowess.
- The PLA's focus on far-seas capabilities likely means that its ability to conduct missions for BRI contingencies that have a maritime component is more developed than its ability to conduct land-based expeditionary missions.
- The PLA has not yet had to face a sustained deployment of ground forces overseas—other than the small number of soldiers in permanent UN peacekeeping operations in Africa—and would likely encounter difficulties with maintaining a long-term presence in a land-based contingency.
- Given BRI's breadth of investments around the globe, the PLA will undoubtedly need to address at least some of the non-maritime contingencies discussed above, particularly border security issues. This could lead the PLA to augment its border security capabilities in the future, both by increasing its presence along borders where BRI interests require additional protection and by partnering with other countries' security forces.
- Areas of improvement for PLA expeditionary capabilities include personnel and command training, such as through more far-seas exercises and rotations overseas; better-connected logistics systems through the development of new ports and bases as well as C4ISR networks; and greater coordination of forces overseas through bureaucratic structures such as the Overseas Operations Office and the new theater command structure.
- The priorities for expeditionary force development largely will depend on which contingencies the PLA faces and how well it responds to them. Another factor will be whether the PRC leadership chooses to employ other means to protect overseas investments, such as increased use of private security companies instead of PLA forces.

In conclusion, the PLA will continue to develop its expeditionary capabilities as its economic, political, and security interests expand. The operational and security issues presented by the scope and geographic locations of BRI projects ensure that the demand for the protection of Chinese citizens abroad will continue. The PLA will be required to meet that demand by expanding and honing its expeditionary capabilities in the maritime, air, and land domains. However, the PLA faces challenges in building an expeditionary force, including command and control, adequate training and experience for personnel, and logistics. How it approaches filling these gaps and how well it responds to future contingencies will ultimately dictate the shape and capability of this future expeditionary force.

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# The Potential Dual Use of Support Facilities in the Belt and Road Initiative

*Guifang (Julia) Xue*

**GUIFANG (JULIA) XUE** is a Distinguished Professor in the KoGuan Law School and Director of the Center for Rule of Ocean Law Studies and the Center for Polar and Deep Ocean Development at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. She can be reached at <julixue@sjtu.edu.cn>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the potential dual use of facilities supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and considers the implications for the country's possible expansion of its overseas military presence.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

As a significant and far-reaching initiative, BRI promises to strengthen both China's hard and soft power by increasing Chinese cultural and political influence through economic and trade-related activities. Although the support facilities along the BRI routes have potential military uses, their foremost function is to facilitate the implementation of the initiative and protect Chinese investment. The U.S. and other countries should not view BRI as a source of conflict but work to promote the benefits of the process. BRI itself and the facilities constructed along the routes mean to provide support and contribute to the region rather than present force and threaten the world.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Given that BRI aims at economic interests rather than military expansion, it presents an opportunity for the U.S. and China to enhance communication and cooperation, including on common security threats such as terrorism.
- To understand the ties of BRI facilities to military functions, a mechanism to reduce the geopolitical suspicion and ensure security cooperation between the U.S. and China should be put in place. Such a mechanism should aim to increase interactions between the two sides in order to build confidence and mutual trust and facilitate the peaceful and smooth development of military-to-military relations.
- China and the U.S. will need to develop an effective way of managing competition and conflicting views. Better-coordinated relations will make the Indo-Pacific a safer and more prosperous region.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, aims to promote economic opportunities and linkages by building infrastructure and transport capabilities between China and its neighboring countries along historical land and maritime trade routes.<sup>1</sup> Covering around 125 countries, connecting 65% of the world's population and 40% of global GDP, the initiative has great potential to make a significant impact on the global economic and political structure.<sup>2</sup> Through BRI, China expects to enhance connectivity and economic growth by providing development assistance to the region and expanding surface, sea, and air linkages across the Eurasian landmass and Indo-Pacific periphery.

However, the scope, scale, standards, and strategic intentions behind BRI, as well as the adequacy of China's plans for implementing its vision, have been questioned. The profound impact that the initiative may have on international trade and the regional economic architecture has also been debated. In particular, given the rapid increase in Chinese capability witnessed in recent decades, there are concerns about the country's ambitions for leadership and geopolitical influence. China's construction of support facilities in the BRI context and possible expansion of its overseas military presence, particularly after the establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, have only heightened speculation about China's strategic intentions.

This essay will look at the potential dual use of China's BRI-support facilities and the military implications, in particular for the United States. The essay will also discuss possible scenarios involving China's switch to dual use and identify the areas in which the country could further refine its policies to avoid risks. A better appreciation of Beijing's vision and goals for BRI will help facilitate cooperation between China and other countries.

BRI is the most significant and far-reaching initiative China has ever put forward, and the Chinese government has generated unprecedented effort and political will to ensure its smooth development with financial, political, legal, and infrastructural support. The initiative has the potential to strengthen China's hard and soft power by increasing Chinese cultural and political influence through economic and trade-related activities. China's goal, therefore, may be not only to increase economic integration and build infrastructure along the routes but also to play a larger role in global governance and international affairs by developing a China-centered trading network and system. BRI may in fact serve as a game changer, facilitating a shift from the old paradigm of geopolitics to the new one of a "community of common destiny."<sup>3</sup>

Looking ahead, as China's national interests become more global, BRI may be expanded to involve more military support of a defensive nature. Given its emphasis on peaceful development, China is unlikely to engage in traditional security operations in the foreseeable future. Yet nontraditional security would appear to be a domain where the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will be showcased. Given that nontraditional security threats are a common problem faced by all members of the international community, a greater appreciation

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<sup>1</sup> The Silk Road Economic Belt was unveiled by Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University on September 7, 2013, during his state visit to Kazakhstan. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road was announced before the Indonesian parliament on October 3, 2013, as part of Xi's state visit to Indonesia. For details about BRI, see NDRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (PRC), "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," March 30, 2015, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects," Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (PRC), Belt and Road Portal, April 22, 2019, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/qwfb/86739.htm>; and Li Jinlei, "Report: Silk Road Economic Belt May Be Divided into Three Phases: Initial Completion Predicted in 2049," China News, June 28, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Also known as "a community of shared future for mankind," which promotes global values regarding the interdependent concepts of international power, common interests, sustainable development, and global governance. For details, see Xi Jinping, "Towards a Community of Common Destiny and a New Future for Asia" (keynote speech at the Boao Forum for Asia, Boao, March 28, 2015), <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgvienna/eng/zt/ce/t1250169.htm>.

of Chinese military activities in this domain could serve as a useful platform from which to recognize future avenues for cooperation and contribute to building confidence between China and countries in the region.

The first section of this essay examines the functions of support facilities by emphasizing that BRI aims to contribute to the region rather than build China's military presence or otherwise threaten the world. This section is followed by a discussion of scenarios for China's potential adjustment of the dual-use function of support facilities to respond to internal perceptions or external threats. The final section assesses implications and considers policy options for the United States and China to increase security cooperation in order to reduce geopolitical suspicion.

## The Functions of Support Facilities

Among the various impacts of BRI, the construction of maritime support facilities has caused probably the most serious concern because these facilities could, in theory, be used by both commercial and naval ships.<sup>4</sup> They provide the physical infrastructure for trade and transportation, which play a critical role in sustaining the smooth development of BRI projects. Meanwhile, these facilities could also support military activities by safeguarding sea lines of communication (SLOCs). This "dual use" scenario has generated considerable concerns about the potential for Chinese military expansion, especially after China announced its first military base in Djibouti in November 2015.

To assess the nature of these support facilities, this section will address three questions. First, what is the intention behind the construction of these facilities? Second, is BRI a contribution or a threat to the world? Third, what does China expect from operating the facilities?

### *To Provide Support or Present Force?*

Since BRI was proposed, the Chinese government has issued a series of documents and undertaken concrete actions to provide comprehensive political and legal support to ensure the smooth development of this far-reaching initiative.<sup>5</sup> In December 2014, China established the \$40 billion Silk Road Fund to provide economic and financial support for infrastructure, industrial, and financial cooperation as well as for other projects related to the connectivity of countries along BRI routes.<sup>6</sup> The following year, in December 2015, China led the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and, as the largest shareholder, invested \$50 billion to promote interconnectivity in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

To encourage cooperation on BRI projects and reduce investment risk, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce issued the document "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic

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<sup>4</sup> For a description of China's BRI objectives and functions, see "China Sketches Out Priorities of 'Belt and Road' Initiatives," State Council Information Office (PRC), February 2, 2015, [http://english.gov.cn/state\\_council/vice\\_premiers/2015/02/02/content\\_281475048990884.htm](http://english.gov.cn/state_council/vice_premiers/2015/02/02/content_281475048990884.htm); "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), March 8, 2015; and Sheng Zhong, "Beijing, Where the Dreams Begin," *People's Daily*, November 10, 2014. See also "An Outlook on China's Diplomacy," *Beijing Review*, March 19, 2015, [http://www.bjreview.com.cn/quotes/txt/2015-03/14/content\\_678299.htm](http://www.bjreview.com.cn/quotes/txt/2015-03/14/content_678299.htm).

<sup>5</sup> See Jianmin Wu, "'One Belt and One Road,' Far-Reaching Initiative," *China-US Focus*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/one-belt-and-one-road-far-reaching-initiative>; and Jianmin Wu, "China to Play a Bigger Role as a World Contributor," *China Daily*, April 20, 2015, [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/20/content\\_20481447.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/20/content_20481447.htm).

<sup>6</sup> "China Pledges 40 Bln USD for Silk Road Fund," *Xinhua*, November 8, 2014, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/hyygd/1893.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> "Ya Tou Hang" [Asian Investment Bank], *China Belt and Road Network*, September 28, 2016, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/rcjd/958.htm>.



Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” in March 2015.<sup>8</sup> The NDRC and the State Oceanic Administration later issued the “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative” in June 2017 in order to set up “the all-dimensional, multi-tiered and broad-scoped Blue Partnership...to build a peaceful and prosperous 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”<sup>9</sup> To implement this initiative, China established the Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative and published in May 2017 *Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China’s Contribution* to promote better understanding of the initiative.<sup>10</sup> More importantly, China formally put BRI into its constitution after the 19th Party Congress in late 2017. These actions underscore China’s sincerity, determination, and commitment to its partners.

As expressed by numerous official statements, the initial focus of BRI is on investment in infrastructure, including railways and highways, ports, real estate, and power grids. The initiative aims to construct a large integrated market through the creation of cultural exchanges to enhance mutual understanding and earn the trust of participating nations, a shared talent pool, and technology databases to encourage innovation.<sup>11</sup> China thus expects to turn its neighborhood into a community of common destiny based on win-win cooperation and connectivity.<sup>12</sup> As of September 2018, 137 Confucius Institutes had been built in 53 of the 65 participant countries.<sup>13</sup> They are important platforms for cultural exchange and improvement of neighborhood relationships.<sup>14</sup>

### *To Contribute to the Region or Threaten the World?*

Emphasizing a priority area of connectivity, China has developed transportation networks of roads, railways, ports, and energy corridors along BRI routes in Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and other countries. These networks are mostly invested in and managed by China’s state-owned corporations.<sup>15</sup> At least eight are deepwater ports, and the Gwadar (Pakistan), Salalah (Oman), and Seychelles ports could be converted into naval bases.<sup>16</sup> The dual-use potential has caused concerns and anxiety about China’s ambitions for building up its military presence along

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<sup>8</sup> NDRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”

<sup>9</sup> NDRC and State Oceanic Administration (PRC), “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” June 2017, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydylgw/201706/201706200153032.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative (PRC), *Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China’s Contribution* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2017), <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydylyw/201705/201705110537027.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> State Council Information Office (PRC), “China Unveils Action Plan on Belt and Road Initiative,” March 28, 2015, [http://english.gov.cn/news/top\\_news/2015/03/28/content\\_281475079055789.htm](http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/03/28/content_281475079055789.htm).

<sup>12</sup> See “Xi Eyes More Enabling International Environment for China’s Peaceful Development,” Xinhua, November 30, 2014, available at [http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off\\_the\\_Wire/2014-11/30/content\\_34187896.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2014-11/30/content_34187896.htm); Wu, “‘One Belt and One Road,’ Far-Reaching Initiative”; and Wu, “China to Play a Bigger Role as a World Contributor.”

<sup>13</sup> Mingyang Zhou, “‘Yidai Yilu’ yanxian yi you 53 guo jianli 137 suo Kongzi Xueyuan” [137 Confucius Institutes Have Been Established in 53 Countries along the “Belt and Road”], Belt and Road Portal, September 11, 2018, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/roll/65817.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Irina Ionela Pop, “Strengths and Challenges of China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiative,” Centre for Geopolitics and Security in Realism Studies, February 9, 2016, 7.

<sup>15</sup> China’s port-construction projects in the Indian Ocean region include Beira (Mozambique), Bagamoyo (Tanzania), Lamu (Kenya), Obock/Doraleh (Djibouti), Gwadar (Pakistan), Marao Atoll (Maldives), Colombo and Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar). Jayanna Krupakar, “China’s Naval Base(s) in the Indian Ocean—Signs of a Maritime Grand Strategy?” *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 3 (2017): 207–22. The China Ocean Shipping Company has offices at overseas ports like Antwerp, Piraeus, Suez, and Singapore. See Morgan Clemens, “The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA: Part Two,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, April 3, 2015, 13.

<sup>16</sup> These deepwater ports would provide enough space for military operations. For relevant discussions, see Jeremy Page, “China Builds First Overseas Military Outpost,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-builds-first-overseas-military-outpost-1471622690>; and Abhijit Singh, “China: Getting Ready to Dominate the Indian Ocean?” *National Interest*, web log, January 27, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/china-getting-ready-dominate-the-indian-ocean-12130>.

the BRI routes.<sup>17</sup> The great powers, with geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic projects stationed in Eurasia, perceive BRI as a security threat.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it could be true that China may pursue the initiative as a geopolitical strategy to expand its military presence, particularly in the Indian Ocean where its security interests are growing.<sup>19</sup> Some European countries instinctively consider BRI to be a Chinese version of the Marshall Plan and are skeptical about Chinese investment in Europe.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, many Central and Eastern European countries have officially endorsed BRI upon further consideration of the initiative and hope to cooperate with China to create jobs and improve local infrastructure.

The development of support facilities for BRI projects is a natural reaction to the problematic and even hostile environment that China faces in protecting its own vital interests, as well as those of other countries along the BRI routes, against terrorism, piracy, armed rebellion, and other potential threats.<sup>21</sup> China favors diplomatic and economic means over military means as the primary tools to secure its interests. However, logistic facilities like ports and docks are essential infrastructure for maintaining reliable shipping lanes, and safety is vital for BRI development.<sup>22</sup> Without support facilities and naval protection, no project can be implemented.

China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean has evolved since 2009 through the PLA Navy's counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and noncombatant evacuation operations in Libya and Yemen. With limited supply ships suitable for long-range missions, the PLA Navy frequently uses commercial ports for replenishment.<sup>23</sup> As of now, there is little evidence to suggest that China intends to construct more bases or conduct combat operations in the Indian Ocean, whether to encircle India or to dominate South Asia more generally.<sup>24</sup> In other words, China's involvement in the region will not necessarily lead to naval bases.<sup>25</sup>

Through its growing economic influence, China proposes a new model of win-win cooperation by providing public goods for participating countries. China's investment in BRI projects has improved the level of local infrastructure, economic growth, and connectivity and contributed to regional development. Although this ambitious plan of linking the world by new trade routes has received a mixed response, given the progress already made, it is fair to say that BRI constitutes

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher J. Pehrson, *String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China's Rising Power across the Asian Littoral* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2006/ssi\\_pehrson.htm](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2006/ssi_pehrson.htm). See also Eleanor Albert, "Competition in the Indian Ocean," Council on Foreign Relations, May 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/regional-security/competition-indian-ocean/p37201>.

<sup>18</sup> Pop, "Strengths and Challenges of China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative," 8.

<sup>19</sup> James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 123.

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller account, see Chun Ding, "Ouzhou dui 'Yidai Yilu' changyi zhuanxiang jiji canyu" [Europe Turned to Active Participation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative], *Guanming ribao*, January 26, 2018, [http://news.gmw.cn/2018-01/26/content\\_27458339.htm](http://news.gmw.cn/2018-01/26/content_27458339.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Ben Simpfendorfer, *The New Silk Road: How a Rising Arab World Is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and David B.H. Denoon, ed., *China, The United States, and the Future of Central Asia*, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Cigui Liu, "Fazhan haiyang hezuo huoban guanxi, tuijin 21 shiji haishang Si Chou Zhi Lu jianshe de ruogan sikao" [Thoughts on Developing Marine Partnership and Promoting the Construction of Maritime Silk Road in the 21st Century], *Guoji wenti yanjiu*, no. 4 (2014): 1–8.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, "Can China Become a Maritime Power?" in *Asia Looks Seaward: Power and Maritime Strategy*, ed. Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), 106.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher D. Yung et al., "Not an Idea We Have to Shun": Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century," Institute for National Strategic Studies, October 2014, 2, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-7.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Susanne Kamerling and Frans-Paul van der Putten, "An Overseas Naval Presence without Overseas Bases: China's Counter-piracy Operation in the Gulf of Aden," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40, no. 4 (2011): 119; and Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, "Implications of China's Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 11, 2011, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=37633&cHash=7278..#.VM5h0miUd1Y](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37633&cHash=7278..#.VM5h0miUd1Y).

a contribution rather than a threat and that China's construction of facilities along BRI routes is benign.<sup>26</sup>

### *To Protect Investment or Invite Trouble?*

BRI was proposed under the combined pressure of domestic economic stagnation and productive overcapacity and was designed to help resolve China's own dilemma rather than to achieve global domination.<sup>27</sup> Investing in ports located in strategic positions no doubt helps China diversify its supply of overseas energy and raw materials, safeguard its SLOC access and security, and improve its overall geopolitical position.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, increased overseas investment requires practical military protection for Chinese nationals, assets, and ships carrying its flag abroad.<sup>29</sup> The main function of the overseas facilities is to provide support for China's "far-seas protection," according to the 2015 white paper *China's Military Strategy*.<sup>30</sup> BRI is thus linked with a blue water naval capability related to protecting the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean on which China depends for access to energy and other raw materials from the Middle East, Africa, and the European market.<sup>31</sup>

China's military base in Djibouti enables the PLA Navy to execute this new naval doctrine of far-seas protection.<sup>32</sup> The base plays an important role in logistics support for improving the tempo of military operations, the efficiency of public security, and the supply of goods.<sup>33</sup> By providing resupplying and refueling convenience, the base equips the PLA Navy with the capability to conduct multiple military operations other than war (MOOTW), such as escort operations at sea.<sup>34</sup> It also presents opportunities for China to cooperate on regional security with other major powers stationed there.

Facing practical challenges in logistics support and replenishment, as well as multiple risks ranging from geopolitical factors to strategic suspicion, China is not motivated to replicate the Djibouti model. Instead, it favors the commercial model (the development of ports purely for commercial use) and the dual-use model (the development of commercial ports with the potential

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<sup>26</sup> The Chinese government proposes to boost trade and economic integration across Eurasia through over \$1 trillion worth of investment. For further discussion, see Christopher Len, "China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Energy Security and SLOC Access," *Maritime Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2015): 14.

<sup>27</sup> For a fuller account, see Yong Wang, "Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China's New Grand Strategy," *Pacific Review* 29, no. 3 (2016): 455.

<sup>28</sup> Yu Hong, "Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105 (2017): 360.

<sup>29</sup> Len, "China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative," 13; and Alison A. Kaufman, "China's Participation in Anti-piracy Operations Off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications," CNA, Conference Report, July 2009, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Bing Wen, "Haijun zhanlüe you 'jinhai fangyu xing' zhuanxiang 'jinhai fangyu yu yuanghai huwei xing jiegou'" [The Naval Strategy Transfers from "Offshore Defense" to "Offshore Defense Combined with Far Sea Protection"], Ifeng Talk, May 27, 2015, [http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150527/43842671\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/a/20150527/43842671_0.shtml).

<sup>31</sup> Fang Liang, "Jinri haishang Si Chou Zhi Lu tong dao fengxian you duo da" [What Is the Risk of Today's 'Maritime Silk Road' Channel], Jun wang, February 11, 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2015-02/11/content\\_6351319.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwgd/2015-02/11/content_6351319.htm); Swaran Singh, "China's Expanding Energy Deficit: Security Implications for the Indian Ocean Region," in *Energy Security and the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. Dennis Rumley and Sanjay Chaturvedi (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 2005), 177; and Kaufman, "China's Participation in Anti-piracy Operations Off the Horn of Africa," 8.

<sup>32</sup> Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick deGateno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base," CNA, July 2017, vii.

<sup>33</sup> See Dingli Shen, "Don't Shun the Idea of Setting Up Overseas Military Bases," China.org.cn, January 28, 2010, [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-01/28/content\\_19324522.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2010-01/28/content_19324522.htm).

<sup>34</sup> For further discussion, see Guifang Xue and Jie Zheng, "China's Overseas Basing: Necessities and Risk Response in the Twenty-First Century," *Global Review*, no. 4 (2017): 108; "China Formally Opens First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti," Reuters, August 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti/china-formally-opens-first-overseas-military-base-in-djiboutiidUSKBN1AH3E3>; and Sarah Zheng, "China's Djibouti Military Base: 'Logistics Facility,' or Platform for Geopolitical Ambitions Overseas?" *South China Morning Post*, October 1, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2113300/chinas-djibouti-military-base-logistics-facility-or>.

to serve military functions). As Susanne Kamerling and Frans-Paul van der Putten argue, the former “provides an alternative means for China to solve its logistical problems, other than by establishing overseas naval bases or relying entirely on replenishment ships sent from China.”<sup>35</sup> Logistics companies can be reliable partners for the PLA Navy, and China has experimented with outsourcing logistics support to the private sector to increase the flexibility and sustainability of its maritime endeavors.<sup>36</sup> In countries where it enjoys close ties to the host country, China may gradually select some overseas commercial ports for dual use to project power.<sup>37</sup> The following section considers scenarios in which China might seek to develop the military functions of such dual-use facilities.

## Potential Adjustment of the Dual-Use Function

The available official documents and records of China’s activities to promote BRI infrastructure projects appear to be logical and consistent and do not suggest that China plans to increase its overseas military presence. However, potential scenarios exist that may affect its decision to switch on the military functions of dual-use facilities.

### *Self-Adjustment to Internal Perceptions*

China’s BRI facilities and the Djibouti base manifest a new naval strategy that emphasizes far-seas protection, in addition to the deployment of escorting destroyers to safeguard commercial vessels. Considering that the main goals of BRI are economically oriented, China may have limited motivation to expand the facilities into military functions. Yet given its economic status, military capacity, and complicated power relations, it could at some point decide to adopt a more forceful approach to address security threats and negative disruptions in developing BRI. A general preference for nonmilitary means of exerting influence should not be taken to mean that military assets are absent from China’s security strategy.

Overseas interests shape the boundaries of national security.<sup>38</sup> As China’s overseas interests grow, the need for military protection also increases. As a result of heightened threat perceptions and national security demands, China may resort to force to protect its overseas interests and secure windows of development opportunity. Should these threat perceptions be borne out, the country might adjust its pattern and pace for the construction of BRI facilities, and a robust overseas logistics base would enable it to project and sustain power at greater distance from home. China may divert political, diplomatic, and financial resources toward overseas military basing.

With the experience gained from its counterpiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, China is capable, both operationally and financially, of sustaining and expanding additional overseas military bases. Nevertheless, the maintenance of overseas power depends on long-term economic vitality at home, and the decade ahead will be critical in determining whether China’s economic development could sustain such a path. Furthermore, it is not necessary for China to establish

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<sup>35</sup> Kamerling and van der Putten, “An Overseas Naval Presence without Overseas Bases,” 132.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.; and Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, “China’s Strategic Access to Gwadar Port: Pivotal Position in Belt and Road,” S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), RSIS Commentary, January 6, 2017, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CO17005.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Xinhua Liu, “Liliangchang xiaoying, Guadaer gang yu Zhongguo de xi yinduyang liyi” [Power Field Effect, Gwadar Port and China’s West Indian Ocean Interest], *Forum of World Economics and Politics*, no. 5 (2013): 17, available at <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/a84c7dba0975f46526d3e12a.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Wenmu Zhang, *Lun Zhongguo hai quan* [On China’s Sea Power] (Beijing: Ocean Press, 2009), 210–11.

multiple bases in order to perform small-scale, low-intensity security tasks. For example, it could use BRI facilities for defensive purposes, thereby reducing unnecessary military consumption and other negative consequences.

### *Reactive Adjustment to External Threats*

China tends to rely on diplomatic, political, and economic influence to secure its overseas interests, and avoids using military engagement as a primary tool for security solutions.<sup>39</sup> However, based on years of practical experience and theoretical development ahead, China's promotion of BRI will become systematized and comprehensive in the long run. Following recent military modernization and restructuring, the PLA has undergone qualitative changes to its organization, force structure, and operations to incorporate a wide range of contingency responses and professional skills beyond its traditional capabilities. As a result, China may attempt to enhance the dual-use function of its facilities in reaction to destructive threats from other major powers, especially the United States and India, that limit its opportunities.

The U.S.-China relationship is going through a critical change. As a rising power, China has reshaped the global power structure and challenged U.S. economic and military dominance. If the two countries fail to figure out a way to keep this competition from becoming a source of conflict, this rivalry may extend beyond the Indo-Pacific to become a global competition with significant consequences. The interplay of the power logic in U.S. strategy and defense policy between engaging and containing China may also affect Beijing's realization of its vision for BRI to some extent. China may adopt a reactive approach toward the likely threats to national security and development interests. Given that additional overseas naval logistics and basing sites would better position the PLA Navy to execute "near sea defense, far sea protection" operations, China may expand its military presence.

Certainly, before pursuing this option, China has to weigh the potential gains and losses, minimize obstacles that may interrupt the operation of BRI, and consolidate existing resources with nonmilitary tools rather than expand its military presence.<sup>40</sup> Excessive overseas military expansion would lead to heavy economic and political burdens. Another critical challenge is China's consistent commitment to the "five principles of peaceful coexistence" and pledge that it would not station troops in the territories of other countries.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, with its expanding global role, China has pushed itself toward being a responsible stakeholder and has characterized BRI as a critical part in achieving that process.<sup>42</sup> Using this initiative to justify overseas military deployments would tarnish China's reputation and undermine BRI ideals and values.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See Jacqueline Newmyer, "Oil, Arms, and Influence: The Indirect Strategy behind Chinese Military Modernization," *Orbis* 53, no. 2 (2009): 205–19; and Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 332.

<sup>40</sup> Xue and Zheng, "China's Overseas Basing: Necessities and Risk Response," 120.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, State Council Information Office (PRC), *China: Arms Control and Disarmament (November 1995)* (Beijing, December 28, 2004), <http://www.china-un.ch/eng/bjzl/t176939.htm>; State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 1998* (Beijing, September 1998); and State Council Information Office (PRC), *China's National Defense in 2000* (Beijing, October 16, 2000). See also Hua Huang, "Speech before the UN General Assembly," Tenth Special Session on Disarmament, UN Doc. A/S-1-/PV.7, May 29, 1978, 140, par. 129.

<sup>42</sup> Kerry Brown, "The Belt and Road: Security Dimensions," *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 3 (2018): 213–22.

<sup>43</sup> Clemens, "The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA: Part Two," 12; and Frans-Paul van der Putten, "The Sino-U.S. Power Shift in the Developing World: China's Policy of Global Diversity," International Studies Association, Conference Paper, March 20, 2011, available at [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/4/9/9/5/9/p499596\\_index.html?phpsessid=11ba673ca04cdeea89c2345c2780386](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/4/9/9/5/9/p499596_index.html?phpsessid=11ba673ca04cdeea89c2345c2780386).

## Implications and Policy Options

Rather than developing new overseas military bases, China is most likely to deploy a commercial or dual-use model to support the future projection of military power. To evaluate the implications of such an approach, it is necessary to understand the close ties between BRI facilities and military functions. Doing so will be helpful for assessing options to reduce geopolitical suspicion and promote security cooperation.

### *BRI Facilities and Potential Military Functions*

BRI is geographically divided into several land corridors where China has laid out the necessary infrastructure and logistic capacities for its related interests.<sup>44</sup> These Chinese-built and -operated corridors are for civilian use. Though it is unclear whether Beijing really uses BRI facilities for military purposes, it is certain that such assets will need to be safeguarded by military operations. The promising side is that BRI targets economic interests rather than military expansion, and China's strategic thinking about security solutions does not prioritize military engagement. Thus, even when the PLA's reach spans the globe, China would still likely favor nonviolent means to protect its overseas interests, though the degree to which it would actually avoid the use of military means remains to be seen.

China has several enduring boundary disputes in the East and South China Seas and along its border with India. China's "peaceful rise" has not been embraced by all of its neighbors due to the lack of trust and complicated bilateral relationships. This partially explains China's concentration of its security efforts on the Indian Ocean. In terms of great-power relations, the Indian Ocean offers more opportunities for China as a newcomer to showcase its responsibility and leadership in counterpiracy and counterterrorism.

In this context, the promotion of BRI is an attempt by China to build a brighter future together with its neighbors through enhancing regional connectivity. The vision and actions on jointly building BRI projects have been endorsed by China's top economic planner, the NDRC, and by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce. China has leveraged BRI's advantages in various regions to encourage more interaction, engaged with strategic partners and participating countries to improve the content and mode of projects, and developed plans, timetables, and roadmaps for implementing cooperative mechanisms.

China's counterpiracy mission began in January 2009 in the Gulf of Aden and marked the PLA Navy's first expeditionary deployment. This operation offers a perspective on how China uses the navy far outside its own region and might justify the involvement of the navy in the development of BRI projects. Recently China put the PLA Navy at the forefront of its military modernization scheme with the goal of extending its operation far from Chinese shores and in an international setting. In the long run, China will likely acquire a full blue water naval capability with a global reach similar to that of the other great powers.

China's establishment of the Djibouti facility marks a fundamental departure from its foreign and security policy. This indicates that the country is seeking long-term opportunities to expand its military presence and improve its expeditionary capabilities to secure overseas interests. Due to differences in geopolitical situations, cultural backgrounds, and political systems, the rise of China

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<sup>44</sup> "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), March 9, 2016, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1346238.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1346238.shtml).

and the path it takes may be unique. China will not copy the American way, nor will it challenge U.S. supremacy. Instead, it may create a new model for a state to rise from the sea with the full operation of BRI facilities; the westward design of the Belt and Road routes already indicates an obvious avoidance of the United States' sphere of influence.

### *Geopolitical Suspicion and Security Cooperation*

As a grant project, BRI carries significant weight and expectations for China. However, the initiative also faces enormous challenges such as geopolitical suspicion, economic uncertainty, and security risks. It thus presents both challenges and opportunities for U.S.-China relations in the Indo-Pacific. Under the current situation of intensified competition, the biggest challenge is preventing the growth of China's power from confronting the United States' interests in ways that lead to conflict. Beijing must focus on its primary goals and objectives and back up its words with actions so as to avoid heightening tension with the United States and regional countries. China should refrain from expanding its military presence by switching BRI facilities to military bases. Failing to properly manage these risks could lead to a series of negative outcomes that undermine China's economic and security interests, increase geopolitical suspicion, cause frictions, and compromise China's credibility.

To avoid a Thucydides trap in the modern era, both the United States and China will need to think big to devise a formula for peaceful coexistence as well as an effective way of managing competition and conflicting views. Specifically, they need to work out mutually acceptable interactive models for how to manage their rivalry and leverage military-to-military relations. The facilities in Djibouti could serve as a regional hub for the United States and China to enhance communication and cooperation on security issues.<sup>45</sup> They may be able to use their mutual host country to engage each other and work together to combat nontraditional security threats and provide public goods for countries in the region.<sup>46</sup>

BRI should be viewed by both China and the United States as a vital instrument for forging cooperation, transcending competition, and advancing common interests. The United States should not make the initiative a source of conflict. Instead, it should explore the mutually beneficial aspects of BRI, such as greater regional connectivity and economic growth, and avoid the potential losses that would arise from escalating tensions with China. As this transformation unfolds, it would be useful for the United States to reflect on its own period of rapid development, recognize the differences in concepts and logic, and avoid exaggerating China's capabilities and intentions. This may help the United States find a way to tolerate China's natural growth of influence and consider a more strategic space for a rising China in the international order. Better-coordinated U.S.-China relations will make the Indo-Pacific a safer and more prosperous region.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation with Respect to Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea Off the Coast of Somalia," UN Doc. S/2014/740, October 16, 2014. See also Robin Geiss and Anna Petrig, *Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea: The Legal Framework for Counter-piracy Operations in Somalia and the Gulf of Aden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christopher Daniels, *Somali Piracy and Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012); and John Davis, ed., *Terrorism in Africa: The Evolving Front in the War on Terror* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Liu, "Thoughts on Developing Marine Partnership."

<sup>47</sup> Wang, "Offensive for Defensive," 455.





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# The Dragon's Cuddle: China's Security Power Projection into Central Asia and Lessons for the Belt and Road Initiative

*Raffaello Pantucci*

**RAFFAELLO PANTUCCI** is the Director of International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in London. He can be reached at <[raffaellop@rusi.org](mailto:raffaellop@rusi.org)>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines how China's growing security engagement with Central Asia provides a blueprint for how China might engage with countries through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a similar fashion.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Xi Jinping's decision to deliver one of the speeches announcing BRI in Kazakhstan was not incidental. It highlighted the centrality of Central Asia in Beijing's thinking about the initiative. Consequently, it is useful to examine China's behavior in Central Asia in some detail to understand better the longer-term consequences of Chinese influence and investment in regional countries under BRI. In the security space, Central Asia has been traditionally considered an area of Russian influence, but over time China has gradually increased its interests using five pillars for engagement: the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), training and joint exercises, military aid, military sales, and private security companies (PSCs). Given the analysis of PSCs elsewhere in this report, this essay will focus on the first four pillars in order to better understand the long-term consequences of China's security engagement in Central Asia and survey options for policymakers seeking to address China's growing influence.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Chinese security engagement in BRI countries should be understood in a broader context than military sales. Instead, a continuum of security activity should be considered, encompassing training and multilateral engagement as well as military sales. External powers seeking to understand or counter Chinese influence in this space need to engage in a range of security actions.
- China is investing considerable resources into educating and developing the next generation of security leaders in Central Asia. The longer-term consequences of these efforts may take decades to play out but will likely require a more sophisticated level of engagement from outside powers.
- The SCO is often considered an impotent institution that has failed to deliver any clear action. However, China and other members appreciate the consistent forum for engagement that the SCO provides, and the forum offers China opportunities to influence the normative space.

There is a persistent narrative about Central Asia that Russia leads on security issues while ceding economic leadership to China. This analysis is based on the historical view that Russia's post-Soviet links in the region mean that the country will remain dominant in the security space. This is then translated into a view that China (historically the weaker security power) will abrogate its security interests in the region to Russia.

Yet China is an increasingly consequential actor in Central Asia, rewiring the region with longer-term consequences for Beijing's influence. This trend is increasingly reshaping the regional security apparatus, suggesting that the growing role that China is playing in other domains in Central Asia is extending into the security space. This gradually expanding security role is emblematic of China's growing influence in the region—to Russia's detriment. It also provides an interesting case study for how China's security relations with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries might develop over time and a series of indicators to observe in order to better understand China's longer-term influence in the security domain.

This essay examines China's increased security activity in Central Asia and assesses the implications for its future engagement with countries under BRI. It will do this through exploring four of five pillars of China's security relations with the five Central Asian countries to show how these relationships have evolved over time. The four pillars discussed are the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), training and joint exercises, military aid, and military sales. The omitted pillar is private security companies, which will be examined by other essays in this report. I conclude that China is expanding its security role in Central Asia to protect its interests in the region and is increasingly unwilling to abrogate security entirely to either local security forces or Russia. By doing so, Beijing is demonstrating an approach that could be read as a blueprint for how China might advance its security relations in other BRI countries.

## The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Much of China's security activity in Central Asia is captured in the public imagination through the rubric of the SCO. Founded in the embers of the Cold War as a grouping focused on regional border delineation, the SCO was the first regional security institution outside UN structures that China joined. Originally made up of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, it is an institution whose heart lies in Central Asia. The SCO has now expanded beyond these confines to include India and Pakistan as full members, while Afghanistan, Belarus, and Iran are formal observers and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey are dialogue partners.<sup>1</sup>

The initial logic of joining the SCO varied from country to country. China saw it as an umbrella organization to provide cover for its economic interests in Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> Russia saw it as a way to control and contain Chinese activity in the region,<sup>3</sup> while the Central Asian countries saw it as a way to extract more opportunity from their large neighbors. All of them saw the SCO as an easy way to build on the positive momentum that had accumulated through the Shanghai Five grouping and realized the benefit in establishing alliances in an increasingly U.S.-centric

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<sup>1</sup> "About SCO," Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, [http://eng.sectsc.org/about\\_sco](http://eng.sectsc.org/about_sco).

<sup>2</sup> Huasheng Zhao, "China's View of and Expectations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation," *Asian Survey* 53, no. 3 (2013): 436–60.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview, Beijing, September 2012.

world where NATO was expanding and the push toward democratization was encroaching on their borders. All six of the initial member states were at the moment of the SCO's inception controlled by leaders with authoritarian leanings and strong links to their recent pasts as members of the Communist bloc. The establishment of a grouping in which all members had equal power of determination, and all could find common ground on what they regarded as threats (specifically, anti-state elements), provided them with an alternative to the post-Cold War U.S. order that was emerging.

For China, however, the purpose of the SCO was much more sophisticated. The organization provided a way for the country to embrace its neighbors in a manner that gave them a sense of ownership, but it also provided a forum in which Beijing could test foreign policy tools. It was an opportunity for China to see how international institutions could be built, while also advancing its interests in its immediate neighborhood. This path could be interpreted as similar to the route that it has subsequently taken with BRI, which started as a series of speeches building out of foreign policy thinking in Beijing and ultimately has evolved into a biennial forum and strategic concept that China uses to engage with the world. While BRI may lack the defined structures of the SCO, the SCO shows what the path from discussion forum to institution can look like.

Beijing has yet to realize its goal of transforming the SCO into a regional multilateral economic vehicle, as repeated attempts to create an SCO free-trade area, development bank, or joint account have all been stymied.<sup>4</sup> The closest structure to have been developed in this direction is the SCO Interbank Consortium, which was established in October 2005 and brings together regional development banks.<sup>5</sup> China has also not been able to direct the SCO to be an active force in dealing with its security concerns regionally—something reflected in the bilateral activity that it undertakes independently of the SCO and in the formation of the Quadrilateral Coordination and Cooperation Mechanism (QCCM), which will be discussed in greater detail later. Nonetheless, Peace Mission and other exercises that the SCO undertakes on a semiregular basis provide an opportunity for China to test out its military hardware in quasi-kinetic environments involving foreign powers; learn from experienced armies, especially the Russian Army; and gain greater influence over Central Asian armed forces. These exercises also give Beijing an opportunity to see how equipment survives under fire, as well as to showcase it to a potential customer base. This is an interesting usurpation of a role previously dominated by Russia in the SCO and of other regional security exercises Moscow controls under institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

In the early days of the Peace Mission exercises, the format was heavily influenced by Moscow. Russia had the most experience of all the forces involved and could interoperate easily with the Central Asian forces, sharing a language, equipment, and a history of joint training. Chinese forces, by contrast, often struggled to field enough soldiers who could interoperate with Russian-speaking partners. Over time, Beijing has sent a growing cadre of officers who speak Russian to participate in the exercises and has increasingly used the Peace Mission format as an opportunity to try out (and showcase publicly) new equipment. In the 2010 Peace Mission, the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Caiyu Liu, "Chinese Premier Calls for SCO Free Trade Zone," *Global Times*, December 10, 2018; and "China May Invest \$8 Billion for Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Bank," *AKIpress*, December 6, 2010. On the stymied side of the equation, see the discussion of Russia blocking the \$10 billion fund proposed for the SCO under Hu Jintao in 2012. International Crisis Group, "China's Central Asia Problem," *Asia Report*, no. 244, February 27, 2013, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/chinas-central-asia-problem.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> "The Interbank Consortium of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Vnesheconombank*, <https://xn--90ab5f.xn--p1ai/en/about-us/international-multilateral-cooperation/the-interbank-consortium-of-the-shanghai-cooperation-organization>.

People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force undertook its first long-range cross-border bombing run in neighboring Kazakhstan, with a detachment of H-6H bombers and J-10 fighters using in-air Chinese refueling capabilities before bombing a target in Kazakhstan.<sup>6</sup> In 2014, China debuted its Wing Loong unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), which has the capability to shoot missiles at targets, as part of the exercise in Zhurihe in Inner Mongolia.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan completed the purchase of some of the platforms, while more recently Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are potential buyers.<sup>8</sup> This trend mirrors broader Chinese approaches in BRI countries, where investment is often followed by Chinese standards and equipment.

This incremental change is visible in other institutions as well. The SCO has developed many different structures and mechanisms, including educational institutions, a student exchange program, and ministerial gatherings at numerous levels across all manners of member-state national institutions (from women's organizations to healthcare). One of the more significant security institutions is the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation at the Shanghai University of Politics and Law. The groundbreaking ceremony for its campus was held in 2014 and cohosted by then Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambayev and then Chinese head of security Meng Jianzhu.<sup>9</sup> Funded and developed by the Ministry of Public Security and aimed at border guard and interior ministry forces, the institution provided various training courses to SCO members. The courses lasted a few months and gave these forces experience in China as well as an understanding of its interpretation of international rules and norms regarding counterterrorism legislation and practice.

In terms of practical utility, this institution in some ways supplants the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent. Moved to Uzbekistan from Bishkek in 2004 to strengthen Uzbek participation and to highlight the importance of counterterrorism as a unifying issue, RATS has not delivered much in terms of practical support to the SCO. Although it has provided a forum in which Beijing can continue to advance its rhetoric of countering the "three evils" (terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism) and has facilitated information exchange between SCO members on terrorist groups, RATS has not delivered on many practical goals. On two separate visits to the secretariat, this author struggled to obtain any specific clarification about an operation or specific project RATS had led within the SCO.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it provides another useful structure to help socialize Chinese security norms and build links with Central Asia.

Yet, even as China continues to see the SCO as a useful vehicle in some areas, it has moved beyond the organization in terms of how it is trying to manage certain regional security concerns, particularly with Afghanistan. For example, China established the QCCM structure, a grouping that brings together the chiefs of army staff of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and China in order to discuss border security and counterterrorism.<sup>11</sup> The very existence of this new regional minilateral institution in many ways highlights the failures of the SCO to deliver on China's

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<sup>6</sup> "China Tries Long-Distance Air Attack Mode in SCO Drill," Xinhua, September 20, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> "China's Drone Blasts Off Missile in SCO Anti-terror Drill," *China Daily*, August 27, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Richard D. Fisher Jr., "Kazakhstan Purchases Two Chinese Wing-Loong UCAVs," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, June 7, 2016; "Military Parade Reveals Turkmenistan's New Chinese-Built UAVs," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, November 2, 2016; and "Uzbek State Structures Started Using Chinese Drones," Trend News Agency, July 13, 2018. It is not clear whether Tajikistan has purchased Chinese UAVs, but China is known to be undertaking joint development and training of the platforms with Tajik partners. See "Tajik-Made Drones Demonstrated in Dushanbe on the Sidelines of International Conference," *Asia-Plus*, May 28, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> "China, Kyrgyzstan Pledge Cooperation in Fighting 'Three Evil Forces,'" Xinhua, May 20, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Author's interviews, Tashkent, 2012 and 2014.

<sup>11</sup> "Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan Form Anti-terror Group," *TOLOnews*, August 4, 2016.

regional security concerns. The fact that the SCO was unable to deliver any direct or actionable security outcomes or tools to help manage security questions in Afghanistan—one of the major concerns for almost all members—reflects the failure of the institution. Chinese experts and officials repeatedly disregard the SCO as a useful partner in this respect, yet at the same time they make the point that this is not the function of the SCO, which they value for its convening power.<sup>12</sup> China created the QCCM after years of seeking to focus the SCO as an institution more on Afghanistan—first through the establishment of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group and then later through bringing Afghanistan in as a formal observer.<sup>13</sup> But none of this has moved the organization to focus its unified attention on that country. From Beijing’s perspective, the establishment of the QCCM has filled this gap. It also provides a useful structure for the PLA to formally connect and cooperate with China’s neighbors.

Beyond this mechanism, China has engaged on Afghanistan through a range of multilateral institutions and minilateral formats. These include trilateral forums with Afghanistan and Pakistan; other regional security institutions such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Istanbul Process, and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (with the United States, Afghanistan, and Pakistan); more recently, the current round of peace negotiations led by the trilateral group of the United States, Russia, and China; and bilateral dialogues with countries such as the United States and India. The key point is that all this activity is taking place beyond the SCO and, from Beijing’s perspective, to some degree is a result of that institution’s failure to address the security challenge in Afghanistan. This highlights the pragmatic and utilitarian approach that China takes toward the SCO. Rather than being primarily a tool for the management of security issues, the SCO is a tool for Chinese soft-power projection into Central Asia, while Beijing focuses on alternative institutions to manage its hard-power security concerns.

This trajectory of the SCO highlights a number of lessons for BRI. First, the use of rhetoric about shared security threats shows China appealing to local leaders’ security concerns and fears as a way to create a web of institutions to engage them, ultimately delivering a comprehensive economic, political, and security outcome rather than solely the security one that is publicly articulated. Second, China is willing to create multiple formats for engagement and continually look for new structures and ways to influence regional countries. This has the effect of creating multiple forums for engagement, while also flooding other systems with activity. Finally, the preceding discussion shows how China used security institutions, structures, and rhetoric over an almost fifteen-year period to spread its norms and even standards throughout a region. Such consistent engagement has delivered results in terms of building strong relationships with complicated neighbors to such an extent that it is hard to find expressions of displeasure between them. One can see a similar pattern emerging with BRI as China uses this initiative to brand a range of activities and institutions.

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<sup>12</sup> This point was most recently affirmed to the author at the Tsinghua University World Peace Forum in Beijing in July 2019 during a panel that included experts from Chinese think tanks.

<sup>13</sup> The contact group was first proposed during the 2005 Moscow summit and was formally announced during the 2006 Shanghai summit. See “Joint Communiqué of 2006 Summit (Full Text),” June 15, 2006, [http://www.gov.cn/misc/2006-06/15/content\\_311296.htm](http://www.gov.cn/misc/2006-06/15/content_311296.htm).

## Training and Joint Activity Beyond the SCO

It is not just with respect to Afghanistan that China has created structures beyond the SCO that appear to usurp the expected roles for this organization. China has for some time been providing training in China for Tajik and Kyrgyz border and interior ministry forces in the form of eleven-month language courses as well as scholarships for senior officers and officials to attend schools.<sup>14</sup> These courses serve to build a web of links for China through important institutions in neighboring countries.

In addition, a growing number of Central Asian military officers pass through the PLA National Defence University. In September 2018, officers at the PLA Academy of Military Sciences joked about the fact that recent Central Asian delegations had included numerous senior officials who had been through their educational establishments.<sup>15</sup> Looking beyond the military arena, China has established outreach programs for senior policymakers in Central Asia. For example, it has a training program in Kyrgyzstan that focuses on connecting with members of the country's ruling elite and giving them experience in China.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether similar programs exist elsewhere, but given the growing number of elites who have had some didactic experience in China (for example, new Kazakh president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev), it seems as though Beijing is achieving this goal.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the SCO Peace Mission exercise, China has undertaken a range of bilateral exercises with Central Asian powers, mostly focused on addressing bilateral security concerns. In 2002, it undertook its first bilateral exercise with Kyrgyzstan; in August 2006, it held the Tianshan-1 exercise with Kazakhstan (a bilateral antiterrorism exercise that stretched from Almaty to Yining); and finally, in September of the same year the PLA held its first joint exercise with Tajikistan.<sup>18</sup> China has reportedly been undertaking joint exercises with Uzbek security forces focused on counterterrorism efforts between the People's Armed Police and the National Guard of Uzbekistan.<sup>19</sup> China's first training exercise with Russian forces under the auspices of the SCO was held in 2005 and dubbed the first of the Peace Mission exercises.<sup>20</sup> This order of priorities reflects the importance that China apportions to bilateral exercises with Central Asia as opposed to its broader SCO engagements or efforts with Russia.

Since 2005, China has further undertaken numerous bilateral training exercises, expanding its focus to include border forces. In 2016, it undertook a large joint training exercise with Tajikistan involving some ten thousand troops near the border with Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> This activity has now

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<sup>14</sup> "10 Kyrgyz Border Guards to Receive Training in China Annually," AKIpress, December 25, 2008; "China Plans to Train Tajik Border Guards," Asia-Plus, July 26, 2006; and Sebastien Peyrouse, "Military Cooperation between China and Central Asia: Breakthrough, Limits, and Prospects," Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, March 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interviews, Beijing, September 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview, Bishkek, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Tokayev is reported to have both served at the Soviet embassy in Beijing in the 1980s and studied at the Beijing Language and Culture University. Another alumnus, Karim Massimov, the current National Security Committee Chairman and former prime minister, is his colleague. See "Our Alumni," Beijing Language and Culture University, <http://admission.blcu.edu.cn/en/35/list.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> "China Ends War Games with Kyrgyzstan," Associated Press, October 11, 2002; Bruce Pannier, "China/Kazakhstan: Forces Hold First-Ever Joint Terrorism Exercises," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 24, 2006; and "China, Tajikistan Hold Joint Antiterror Exercises," Xinhua, September 22, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> "Uzbekistan, China Wrap Up Joint Anti-terror Drills," Xinhua, May 16, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Sun Shangwu, "Peace Mission 2005 Ends in Blaze of Glory," *China Daily*, August 26, 2005. This was not the first time Chinese and Russian forces had trained together. The two sides have been training with each other since October 1999, when Russian naval vessels visited and exercised with Chinese counterparts in Shanghai.

<sup>21</sup> "Tajikistan Starts Joint Antiterror Drills with China near Afghan Border," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 21, 2016.

largely become normalized. While China still likely views its bilateral exercises with Russia as a learning opportunity, the dynamic of its exercises with Central Asian countries is different. Beijing sees these exercises as a mechanism for increasing its influence and ensuring that its security concerns will be adequately addressed.

This again provides a longer-term example of how security engagement under BRI is likely to play out. From a security perspective, China is still principally focused on its own interests (e.g., border concerns) rather than larger regional questions. This is something that is particularly relevant in a region like Central Asia that is physically adjacent to China. Looking farther afield, China's security interests within BRI countries are likely to remain equally narrow and focused on avoiding entanglement in local conflicts. This is important to note within the context of BRI. Given that the BRI routes often traverse regions of conflict, Beijing is unlikely to step forward proactively to be a peace broker unless its direct interests are affected.

## Military Aid

China has steadily increased its military aid to Central Asia. While absolute numbers are hard to calculate due to a lack of information, funding flows appear to have commenced in the 1990s. Clear Chinese support for Kyrgyzstan emerged with the signing of initial bilateral agreements at around \$750,000 per annum.<sup>22</sup> Tajikistan reportedly received a similar level of support in the 1990s, with reports suggesting that around \$15 million was given between 1993 and 2008.<sup>23</sup> Aid was provided through grants from the Ministry of National Defense or the Ministry of Public Security and covered uniforms, communications equipment, night-vision devices, office furniture and machinery, and unspecified vehicles.<sup>24</sup> Support further increased in 2014 to include the construction of officers' quarters and barracks in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>25</sup> This marked the beginning of a noticeable growth in military aid from China to both countries, with Defense Minister Chang Wanquan announcing that China was to give hundreds of millions to Tajikistan and \$16 million to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>26</sup> In 2017, then chief of joint staff Fang Fenghui announced another large gift of \$14.5 million to Kyrgyzstan on a visit to Bishkek.<sup>27</sup> There have been similar reports of China providing aid to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Between 1997 and 2003, Kazakhstan received around \$4.5 million in technological aid, communications equipment, and vehicles.<sup>28</sup> Details of aid to Turkmenistan are almost impossible to verify, but experts and diplomats based in Ashgabat have reported at various times Chinese support for Turkmen security structures.<sup>29</sup>

The Afghan border has been an additional source of attention for Chinese military aid and support in Tajikistan. China has reportedly built border posts for Tajik security forces and

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<sup>22</sup> "China to Give 1.3 Million Dollars in Military Aid to Kyrgyzstan," Agence France-Presse, March 15, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Peyrouse, "Military Cooperation between China and Central Asia."

<sup>24</sup> See "Kyrgyzstan to Get 0.5m Dollars of Chinese Military Aid," Kabar, November 12, 2007; and "Kyrgyzstan Receives Military Aid from China," 24.kg, November 12, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> "People's Liberation Army of China to Allocate 100mn Yuan for Needs of Kyrgyzstan's Armed Forces," AKIpress, September 4, 2014; and "China's Defence Minister to Pay an Official Visit to Tajikistan," Asia-Plus, March 28, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> "China Promises Multimillion Military-Technological Aid Package to Tajikistan," Interfax, March 31, 2014; and "People's Liberation Army of China to Allocate 100mn Yuan for Needs of Kyrgyzstan's Armed Forces."

<sup>27</sup> "Chinese, Kyrgyz Armies to Step Up Cooperation in Regional Security Issues," Interfax, March 22, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Peyrouse, "Military Cooperation between China and Central Asia."

<sup>29</sup> For example, an article in the Russian press quoted the Turkmenistan defense minister as saying that the country had received a loan of \$3 million. See Natalia Leshchenko "China Sponsors Development of Turkmenistan's Army," IHS Global Insight, November 28, 2007.



established bases on both sides of the border in Badakhshan.<sup>30</sup> From these locations, Chinese forces reportedly have engaged in joint patrols and provided training (in addition to the training China provides in Xinjiang). China has also given military aid to Afghanistan, including for base construction, training, and the provision of broader security supplies such as airport security gates, uniforms, and communications equipment. While Chinese experts in the past largely denied such reports, now they openly acknowledge military aid, explaining that it reflects China's natural interests in the region.<sup>31</sup>

The lessons for BRI can again be seen in the incremental growth over time of China's military support for and influence in BRI countries. Recognizing local needs, Beijing is willing to provide targeted military support that also addresses its own security needs and concerns. The focus of this aid is not on broader local security issues but rather on narrow Chinese interests. This is a useful point to keep in mind when considering how China might increase its security efforts following BRI investments and how the economic and security dimensions of its relationships with regional countries might interact with each other. What is significant is the degree of influence that military aid provides China in key areas of these countries' security structures.

## Military Sales

The final pillar covered in this essay is a more recent addition to China's security contribution in Central Asia. In some ways, it reflects the fact that the continuum of China's engagement with the region must be considered and underscores the need to consider how this interacts with China's own growth. From being a country whose economy was relatively poor and similar to its Central Asian neighbors (especially in Xinjiang, the adjacent region), China has now leapfrogged into a position from which it is playing the most significant economic role in Central Asia and is increasingly becoming an important security partner to regional countries not only in terms of engagement, aid, and diplomatic status but also in terms of military sales. This is an issue of concern for Russia, which is losing market share to China. Military sales are an important aspect of the development of China's longer-term influence across the region and provide another example of how Chinese influence could spread in BRI countries.

One of the most prominent examples of China's growing role in the region's defense sales is the biennial Kazakhstan Defense Expo. Initiated in 2010, the event is an opportunity for the burgeoning Kazakh defense industry to show its wares while also providing a platform for key regional players to showcase their platforms to a regional customer base. Although China has participated in the expo since the first iteration, its presence and reporting around the event have increased.

Despite this trend, there is limited evidence of substantial military sales by China to Central Asian countries, though the quality of the sales that are known is very high. Currently, the most information is available about Chinese sales to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has purchased Wing Loong UAV platforms as well as Y8F200W military transport

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<sup>30</sup> Minnie Chan, "China Is Helping Afghanistan Set Up Mountain Brigade to Fight Terrorism," *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2018; and "Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan," International Crisis Group, Briefing, no. 87, March 14, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Angela Stanzel, "Fear and Loathing on the New Silk Road: Chinese Security in Afghanistan and Beyond," European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, July 2018.

aircraft from Shaanxi Aircraft Corporation.<sup>32</sup> The latter purchase is likely galling for Russia because the aircraft is an evolution of the Soviet-made Antonov An-12 (Cub)—suggesting that this was a sale that used to go to Russia. Turkmenistan has purchased UAV platforms, HQ-9 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, and the portable equivalent of SAM systems, man-portable air-defense systems, from China.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Uzbekistan has bought higher-end sniper rifles, an HQ-9 SAM system, and UAVs.<sup>34</sup> Tashkent has also reportedly even managed to broker a deal for some knowledge transfer through the development of a local factory to assemble and make UAVs.<sup>35</sup>

Working with locals in sensitive areas or providing opportunities for regional investment that helps develop the industrial base are exactly the sorts of assistance that Central Asian governments are seeking. Uzbekistan, for example, is the regional hub for Huawei and ZTE.<sup>36</sup> Both companies have long-established factories in the country and have used them as a base for regional sales. While these facilities mostly produce commercial software and hardware, they have helped build national telecommunications systems and rail and oil infrastructure. More relevant to security is the development of “safe city” programs, mostly by Huawei, in Dushanbe and reportedly Astana (now Nur-Sultan).<sup>37</sup> Such projects have also long been discussed in Bishkek and Osh. The status of the Kyrgyz projects is unclear, given local pushback, and some local reporting indicates that Huawei and the Kyrgyz government have parted ways.<sup>38</sup>

China is thus one of the most significant (and increasingly influential) technology providers across Central Asia and sells regional countries equipment with both civil and military uses. Although Russia remains the preeminent provider of military hardware, with vestigial Soviet links still dominating procurement structures, China is increasingly becoming the supplier of the future and provides the region with communications technology, UAV platforms, and some bigger-ticket items like missile systems. As China continues to gradually move up the value chain, it is possible that this procurement pattern will similarly change in Beijing’s favor.

China’s military sales to Central Asia set a clear precedent for BRI, particularly in terms of technology provision. The Digital Silk Road is the cyber and digital articulation of the initiative, and as Huawei, ZTE, Hikvision, and other companies commit to investments and projects along BRI routes, China will slowly become a more significant provider in this space. Given the obvious dual-use military, domestic security, and civilian applications of such technology, it is hard not to

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<sup>32</sup> “Kazakhstan Unveils New ‘Pterodactyl’ Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle at KADEx 2016,” Defence Blog, August 22, 2016, <https://defence-blog.com/news/kazakhstan-unveil-new-chengdu-pterodactyl-unmanned-combat-aerial-vehicle-at-kadex-2016.html>; and “Kazakhstan Receives First Y-8 Military Transport Aircraft from China,” Defence Blog, September 23, 2018, <https://defence-blog.com/news/kazakhstan-receives-first-y-8-military-transport-aircraft.html>.

<sup>33</sup> “Military Parade Reveals Turkmenistan’s New Chinese-Built UAVs”; Joshua Kucera, “Turkmenistan Shows Off New Chinese Rockets,” Eurasianet, April 2, 2016; and “New Chinese-Built MANPADS Has Entered Service with Turkmenistan Army,” Defence Blog, January 16, 2018, <https://defence-blog.com/army/new-chinese-built-manpads-has-entered-service-with-turkmenistan-army.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Peyrouse, “Military Cooperation between China and Central Asia.” The acquisition of an HQ-9 SAM system has been reported on military blogs, and a Facebook page captured an image from Uzbek television showing the system in 2018. See People’s Liberation Army Defence Update, “HQ-9 SAM System Revealed by Uzbekistan,” Facebook, December 3, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/pladupdate/photos/a.1017098351660426/1896705360366383/?type=1&theater>. For a report on UAV sales, see “Uzbekistan Purchases Military Drones from China,” AKIpress, June 5, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> “China to Help Uzbekistan Manufacture Drones,” Trend, July 5, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> This has been the case for Huawei since 1999 and for ZTE since 2004. See “Kompaniya Huawei v Uzbekistane” [Huawei in Uzbekistan], Huawei, <https://www.huawei.com/uz/about-huawei/local-states>; and “Istoriya Kompanii ZTE v Uzbekistane” [History of ZTE in Uzbekistan], ZTE, <http://zte.ru/company/zte-in-uzbekistan>.

<sup>37</sup> “Tajik President Has Highly Appreciated the Huawei Project ‘Safe City,’” Asia-Plus, September 3, 2015; and Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Huawei under Radar of Many Countries Fearing Espionage,” *Economic Times*, February 1, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> “Chinese Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Comments Situations with TBEA and Huawei,” Khabar, March 16, 2018. Around a month later, reports emerged that the government was going ahead with installing closed-circuit television cameras around Bishkek by itself. Maria Orlova, “Installation of Video Cameras within Smart City Project Starts in Bishkek,” 24.kg, April 11, 2018.

envision a pattern of activity in which China becomes increasingly influential in key sectors across BRI countries. This trend has already started within Central Asia, and it is likely to continue to play out in a similar fashion in other regions.

## Conclusion

China's approach to Central Asia has been characterized by incremental growth. This includes the defense and security sector, where Beijing has quietly but consistently increased its engagement across a variety of areas. In many ways, this trend simply reflects China's expanding role in the region, but it has consequences that are far-reaching. Specifically, it provides an interesting blueprint for how China's BRI strategy might play out in the longer term in other contexts.

What is particularly significant for the broader BRI narrative is the blend of hard and soft power that China deploys in the defense and security sector. This illustrates how influence in this sector need not only grow through obvious means like joint training or military sales but rather can cover a gamut of activities that cumulatively have the effect of helping rewire a region away from traditional security providers and partners. The long-term impact of this approach is far deeper in some ways than traditional defense and security relationships, which are focused on mitigating specific threats or problems.

China's investment in and development of regional communications infrastructure—whose defense and security importance is only likely to increase over time—reinforces a connection between hard and soft power that is likely to have profound consequences in the long run. The broader consequences for BRI of this ever-tightening security embrace of Central Asia are to show how China can use the defense and security sector to create a web of links and dependencies in the sensitive area of national security in such a way as to ensure its long-term influence and presence. What Beijing is seeking to achieve will of course vary from region to region, but this approach is one that ensures a gradual but influential future role for China, which will continue to act to displace traditional influencers like the United States and Russia.



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# China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor

*Dirk van der Kley*

**DIRK VAN DER KLEY** is the Program Director for Policy Research at China Matters. He is also a PhD candidate in the Centre for Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University. He previously worked as a Research Associate in the East Asia Program at the Lowy Institute. He can be reached at <[dirk.vanderkley@chinamatters.org.au](mailto:dirk.vanderkley@chinamatters.org.au)>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Chinese security activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor and argues that China's increasing assertiveness in these regions is manifest in capacity building, joint operations, and greater alignment of security interests.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

China is beefing up its security presence in Tajikistan and the Afghan Wakhan Corridor in order to maintain domestic security in Tajikistan and to prevent instability from spilling over from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and then into Xinjiang. To achieve this goal, China is implementing a three-pronged security approach that involves (1) providing equipment and facilities to boost Tajikistan's security capabilities, (2) conducting joint operations with Tajik and Afghan forces near the border of all three countries, and (3) aligning Tajikistan's security interests with its own. China is facing similar challenges to implementation to those that the U.S. and Russia confronted before it—Tajikistan's security forces are beset with corruption and institutional weakness. To address these challenges, the joint operations component attempts to fill security gaps in the geographic area nearest China.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- China is unlikely to become involved in the broader Afghanistan conflict. Instead, the People's Armed Police deployment based in Shaymak, Tajikistan, as well as joint operations with Tajik and Afghan forces, will at this stage continue to be primarily focused on securing the Afghan border with Tajikistan and China.
- Beijing is seeking to co-opt and strengthen local forces to protect Chinese projects and interests. China already uses this method in countries such as Pakistan and could expand this approach to secure its assets and interests elsewhere.
- The global détente between China and Russia does not extend to security in Central Asia, and the two sides are not cooperating in Tajikistan. To the contrary, since around 2016, Russia has increased its security presence in Tajikistan in response to China's growing security activities.

One early sign of a People's Armed Police (PAP) deployment based in Shaymak, Tajikistan, near the confluence of the Afghan border with Tajikistan and the People's Republic of China (PRC), was comments by an English backpacker hiking through the Afghan Wakham Corridor in 2016 about having "a fun adventure hanging with Afghan commanders, Chinese military and Tajik soldiers...at the military checkpoints in the Little Pamir."<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land that borders China, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. It is remote and mountainous and has no roads or official border crossings. From Beijing's view, the corridor is a potential conduit for terrorists to travel unnoticed to areas near the PRC border in Tajikistan, where local security forces are limited. China has decided to jointly patrol the corridor with Tajik and Afghan forces to ensure that it does not become an exit route from Afghanistan. The presence of Chinese security services in the Wakhan Corridor should be seen in terms of China's desire to limit the spillover of instability into Tajikistan rather than as part of a plan to put boots on the ground in the rest of Afghanistan.

This essay seeks to answer the following research questions: How does China protect its security interests in Tajikistan in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) era? How does the initiative affect China's security calculations in Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor? Moreover, how is BRI used to strengthen China's cooperation with Tajikistan to secure the Wakhan Corridor? This research program has policy relevance for three reasons: First, it helps clarify China's security intentions in Afghanistan. Second, it addresses how China could operate in countries with limited security capacity such as Tajikistan. Finally, this research can inform discussion on how China will protect its interest in other BRI countries.

China's main interests in Tajikistan is maintaining domestic stability so that the country remains a buffer against violence from Afghanistan and to ensure that it does not become a safe haven for terrorists targeting Xinjiang. That is not new. What has changed is the approach.

Prior to 2014, China's security involvement in Tajikistan (and the Wakhan Corridor) was limited. Both countries participated in multilateral security exercises through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), but Tajikistan did not contribute much. Only one publicly recorded bilateral security exercise occurred before 2014. Occasionally Tajikistan extradited people at China's request, but even this was limited compared with other Central Asian countries with larger Uighur populations.

This pattern began to change in 2014. A number of local factors such as the withdrawal of a majority of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the internationalization of the Uighur issue, and worsening security in Xinjiang have made stability in Tajikistan more pressing and precarious. China has also become more assertive in protecting its interests globally, and this new assertiveness has manifested itself in three ways in Tajikistan: (1) capacity building to help the country maintain domestic stability on its own, (2) joint operations to fill gaps that Tajikistan and Afghanistan cannot fill on their own, and (3) the alignment of Tajikistan's security interests with China's (namely, the protection of Chinese projects and the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border).

This essay demonstrates three other points. First, numerous countries conduct security cooperation with Tajikistan, with Russia being the most active by a long way. Second, Beijing and Moscow do not cooperate on security in Tajikistan apart from SCO military exercises held every two years. Finally, much of China's security engagement mirrors efforts with Tajikistan by

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<sup>1</sup> "The Ultimate Guide to the Afghanistan Wakhan Valley and Pamir," Backpacking Man (web log), December 7, 2018, <http://backpackingman.com/afghanistan-wakhan-hiking-little-pamir>.

the United States and Russia. That said, Chinese security activities are genuinely different in two respects. First, the PRC is pushing Tajik forces to protect its workers and projects. Second, no other country has conducted joint trilateral operations with Afghanistan and Tajikistan on both sides of the border.

The remainder of this essay is divided into five sections. The first section briefly explores the impact of BRI on China and Tajikistan's relationship. The essay then examines China's new security approach to Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor. The subsequent three sections analyze China's capacity building in Tajikistan, its joint operations with Tajik and Afghan forces, and the alignment of Chinese and Tajik security interests.

## The Impact of BRI on China-Tajikistan Relations

BRI is composed of five types of “connectivity”: policy coordination, infrastructure building, trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchange. There has been no financial integration of China with Tajikistan. Exports from China to Tajikistan dropped approximately 40% between 2014 and 2018, but it remains the largest exporter to Tajikistan, while Tajikistan still exports very little to the PRC.<sup>2</sup> Xi Jinping said in 2017 that BRI should be “docked” with Tajikistan's 2030 National Development Strategy (similar to China's policy coordination with Kazakhstan, Qatar, Thailand, and Myanmar).<sup>3</sup> But it is still unclear how this works in practice. On people-to-people exchange, Chinese companies train and employ thousands of Tajik workers as they localize their workforce to take advantage of cheap local wages and respond to pressure from the Tajikistan government.<sup>4</sup> Beijing continues to offer scholarships for Tajik students to attend Chinese universities, and training of Tajik officials has increased modestly as well.

On infrastructure, Beijing has shifted from government-to-government loans to direct investment, which boosts employment, government revenue, and exports (and by extension foreign reserves). The majority of Chinese government lending to Tajikistan occurred between 2007 and 2011.<sup>5</sup> The only major (over \$100 million) post-BRI loan so far was a \$331 million deal for the second stage of a coal-fired power plant in Dushanbe that was inked during Xi's 2014 visit and disbursed in 2015 and 2016 (see **Figures 1** and **2**).<sup>6</sup> Tajikistan continues to borrow from other sources, such as Eurobonds.

Chinese investment in Tajikistan has been higher in the years following the announcement of BRI (see **Figure 3**). Some of this is due to long-planned projects to upgrade preexisting mining

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<sup>2</sup> UN Statistics Division, UN Comtrade Database, <https://comtrade.un.org>.

<sup>3</sup> “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan: The Two Heads of State Agree to Establish China-Tajikistan Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), August 31, 2017, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/XJPZCJZGJLDRD/CHWHXXSCGYFZZGJDHH/t1489594.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/XJPZCJZGJLDRD/CHWHXXSCGYFZZGJDHH/t1489594.shtml).

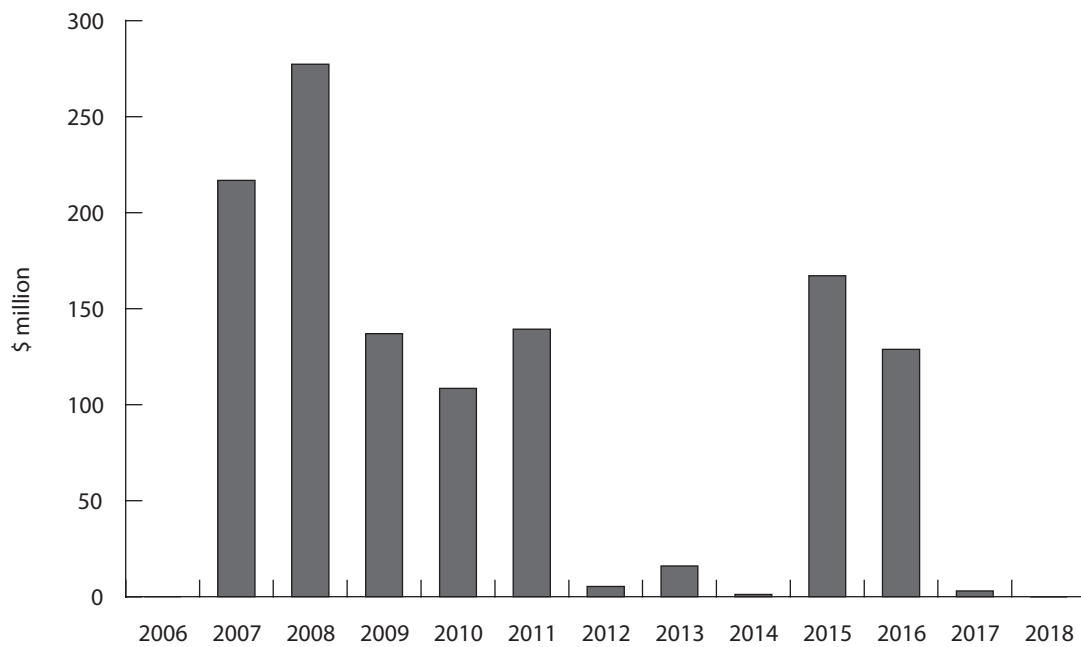
<sup>4</sup> Dirk van der Kley, “Chinese Companies Increasingly Employ Central Asians,” China in Central Asia (web log), December 27, 2016, <http://chinaincentralasia.com/2016/12/27/chinese-companies-increasingly-employ-central-asians/>; “Tajikistan: China Swoops in for Fertilizer Plant,” Eurasianet, December 24, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/node/81686>; “Lian jiu si lu jianshe 'zhen gongfu'—Zhongguo shifu yu yang tudi de gushi” [The “Real Kung Fu” of Silk Road Construction—The Story of Chinese Masters and Foreign Apprentices], Xinhua, August 21, 2016, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-08/21/c\\_1119428000.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-08/21/c_1119428000.htm); and “Guobie touzi jingying bianlihua zhuangkuang baogao” [Individual Country Reports on the Ease of Investment and Doing Business], China Export and Credit Insurance Corporation, December 2015, <http://www.cwta.org.cn/zlk/bg/201703/P020170301506642453751.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “Ministerstvo finansov Respubliki Tadjikistan otchet o sostoyanii gosudarstvennogo dolga za 2018 god” [Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Tajikistan Report on the State of Public Debt for 2018], Ministry of Finance (Tajikistan), 2018, 24–26, [http://minfin.tj/downloads/otchet\\_2018vd.pdf](http://minfin.tj/downloads/otchet_2018vd.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Dirk van der Kley, “The Full Story Behind China's Gold Mine–Power Plant Swap in Tajikistan,” *Diplomat*, April 14, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/the-full-story-behind-chinas-gold-mine-power-plant-swap-in-tajikistan>.

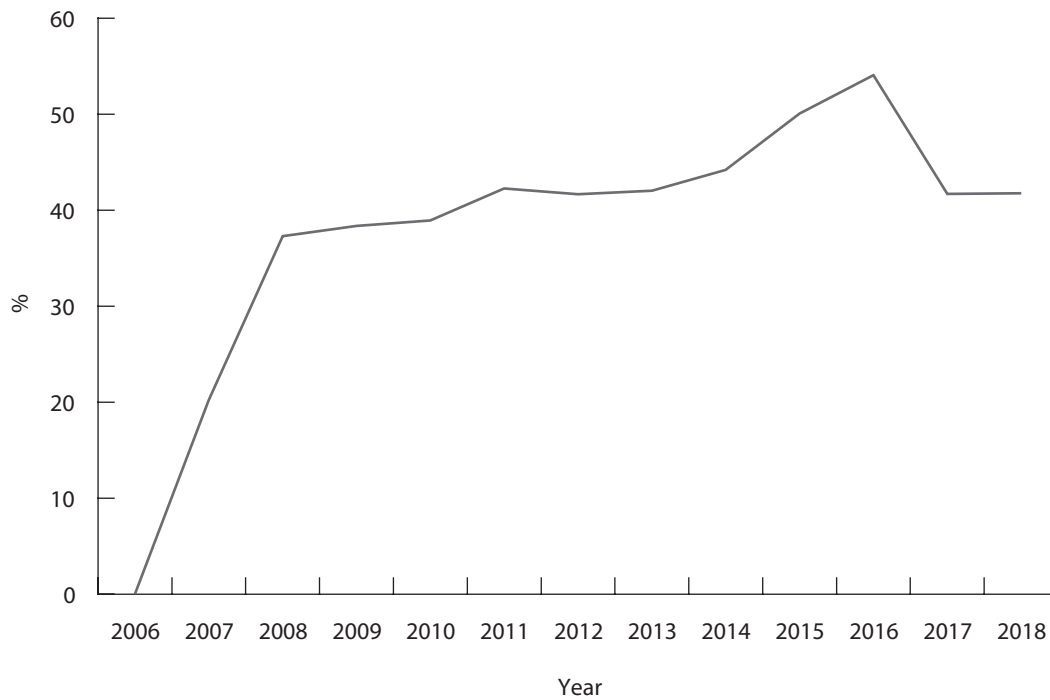


FIGURE 1 Annual net export-import bank disbursements to Tajikistan



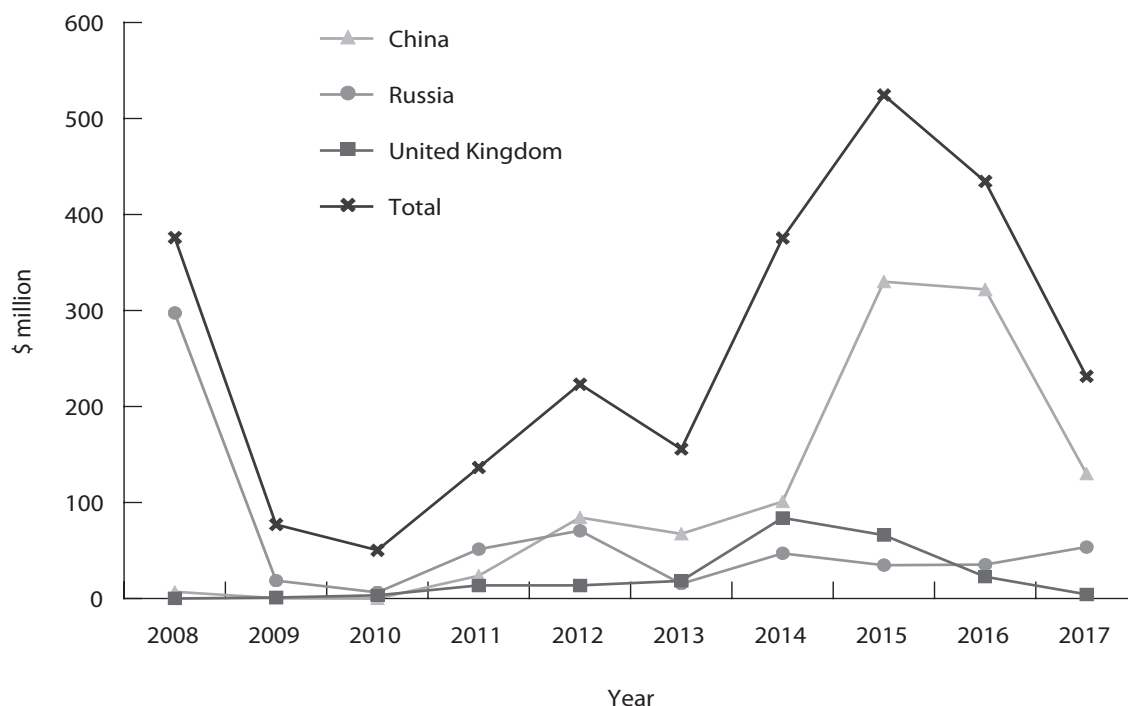
SOURCE: Ministry of Finance (Tajikistan).

FIGURE 2 Percent of Tajikistan's external debt held by China



SOURCE: Ministry of Finance (Tajikistan).

FIGURE 3 Nonfinancial direct investment flows into Tajikistan, 2008–17



SOURCE: National Bank of Tajikistan.

NOTE: Data for 2017 only covers the first three quarters.

operations and build cement plants.<sup>7</sup> Two projects in their formative stages dwarf any current Chinese loan or investment project in Tajikistan. The first is a gas pipeline, Line D, which would run from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to China. The project was announced in 2013 and has progressed in fits and starts. The latest proposed completion date is 2024. Construction is ongoing in Tajikistan and expected to commence in late 2019 in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>8</sup> In Tajikistan the project is being built by a joint venture between a subsidiary of China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Tajikistan's state-run gas distributor.<sup>9</sup> Line D is slated to supply around 30 billion cubic meters per year of gas, which is approximately a quarter of the PRC's current gas imports.<sup>10</sup> The choice of this route is not purely economic. Three gas pipelines already run from Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China. Given that the easiest and cheapest option would be to build Line D alongside these existing pipelines,

<sup>7</sup> Dirk van der Kley, "China Shifts Polluting Cement to Tajikistan," *China Dialogue*, August 8, 2016, <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/9174-China-shifts-polluting-cement-to-Tajikistan>.

<sup>8</sup> "Zhu Tajikesitan Dashi Liubin Chunjie weiwen Zhongyou Guoji Guandao Gongsu xiangmu yuangong" [Ambassador of Tajikistan Liu Binchun Expressed Condolences to the Staff of CNPC International Pipeline Company], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), February 3, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zwbdt\\_673032/jghd\\_673046/t1635520.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zwbdt_673032/jghd_673046/t1635520.shtml).

<sup>9</sup> "Construction of Tajik Section of Turkmenistan–China Gas Pipeline Starts, Says Tajik Official," *Asia-Plus*, January 31, 2018, <https://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/economic/20180131/construction-of-tajik-section-of-turkmenistan-china-gas-pipeline-starts-says-tajik-official>.

<sup>10</sup> Aizhu Chen, "China's Soaring Natural Gas Output Unable to Meet Demand Set Loose in Pollution Fight," *Reuters*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-pollution-gas-production/chinas-soaring-natural-gas-output-unable-to-meet-demand-set-loose-in-pollution-fight-idUSKBN1FP006>.

the route selected is an intentional decision by China to tie Tajikistan's stability to its own energy security. The transit fees would boost Tajikistan's budget and also buy political influence with President Emomali Rahmon.

The second project is the proposed upgrades to the Tajikistan Aluminum Company (TALCO). The company is Tajikistan's leading exporter and a rich source of foreign currency.<sup>11</sup> But output from the existing factory had been declining for some time due to dated technology and poor maintenance. Yunnan Construction and Investment Holding Group in 2018 proposed construction of a \$1.6 billion smelter, with building slated to start in 2019. As part of this deal, TALCO will reportedly become a China-Tajikistan joint venture, but details remain scarce.<sup>12</sup> In April 2019, China Machine and Engineering Corp proposed a \$545 million upgrade of the existing plant. Financing of the proposal remains unclear. The TALCO plans are in their initial stages and may not progress, but there is a clear shift in effort toward projects that generate revenue and foreign currency rather than just basic infrastructure.

## China's New Security Approach to Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor

China's security involvement in Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor before 2013 was limited. Tajikistan participated in multilateral SCO security exercises that were held on an ad hoc basis from 2003 and then every two years from 2010, but its contribution to these was limited. China and Tajikistan held only one publicized bilateral joint security exercise before 2014. Security aid, both civilian and military, was also small, consisting only of jeeps, uniforms, and small amounts of nonlethal technical equipment such as computers. Although Chinese and Tajik security leaders met each other regularly at SCO forums, this did not translate into much meaningful cooperation.

The PRC's security engagement with Tajikistan became more active beginning in 2014. Two trends precipitated this development. First, China's threat perception changed.<sup>13</sup> The Tajik economy weakened due to a sharp drop in remittances from Russia. In some years, remittances have been equivalent to approximately 50% of Tajikistan's GDP.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, the withdrawal of a majority of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014 heightened concerns that violence could spread into Tajikistan. The Chinese ambassador to Tajikistan, Yao Bin, acknowledged in 2018 that Tajikistan "is an important barrier to withstand the spillover effects of the situation in Afghanistan and to prevent terrorist and extremist forces heading north into Central Asia."<sup>15</sup> Deng Hao, secretary general of the China Center for Shanghai Cooperation Organization Studies, likewise observed in October of the same year that "Tajikistan is located in an important part of Central Asia, and it is an important security barrier for every country

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<sup>11</sup> David Trilling, "Tajikistan's Cash Cow: Enough Milk to Go Around?" Eurasianet, June 10, 2014, <https://www.eurasianet.org/tajikistans-cash-cow-enough-milk-to-go-around>.

<sup>12</sup> "V Tadjikistane pri podderzhke Kitaya postroyat novyy alyuminiyevyy zavod" [In Tajikistan a New Aluminum Plant Will Be Built with the Help of China], Sputnik, March 2, 2018, <https://ru.sputnik-tj.com/country/20180302/1024901823/kitay-pomozhet-postroit-tadjikistan-alyuminiyevyy-zavod.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Juanrong Fan and Wei Li, "Yidai Yilu jianshe mianlin de kongbu weixie fenxi" [An Analysis of the Terror Threats Faced in the Construction of the Belt and Road], *Zhongguo Renmin Gong'an Daxue Xuebao*, no. 1 (2018): 22.

<sup>14</sup> "Tajikistan: Annual Remittance Data Confirm Worst Fears," Eurasianet, March 24, 2016, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-annual-remittance-data-confirm-worst-fears>.

<sup>15</sup> "Qingdao Shanghe fenghui Zhongguo zhu Tajikesitan Dashi: Zhong Ta gongtong tuidong Shanghe zuzhi qude xin fazhan" [Chinese Ambassador to Tajikistan: China and the United Tower Jointly Promote the New Development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation], China News Network, June 7, 2018, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/06-07/8532527.shtml>.

in Central Asia and the SCO.”<sup>16</sup> Xi Jinping had stated in 2015 that the SCO needs to “strengthen joint operational capacity to firmly build a regional security barrier.”<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, as concerns over Afghanistan and Tajikistan have grown, China has become more active in security affairs globally. The PRC leadership judged that external risks had increased and Beijing’s security policy needed to be more assertive and better coordinated to protect Chinese interests. Xi said in 2013 that China “faces the dual pressure of safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests externally and safeguarding political security and social stability internally; all kinds of predictable and unpredictable risk factors have significantly increased.”<sup>18</sup> Although overseas security activity had already increased markedly under Hu Jintao,<sup>19</sup> this trend accelerated under Xi. He began reforms to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 2013, established the Central National Security Commission in 2013, and oversaw the passage of the new counterterrorism law in 2015, which legalized overseas counterterrorism activities for PRC security organs. Perhaps most significantly, construction of a PLA facility began in 2015 in Djibouti. Xi also dropped “keeping a low profile” as a guiding principle of the PRC’s foreign policy, instead favoring terms like “striving for achievement.”<sup>20</sup>

Senior officials in the security services judged that the gap between international and domestic security had shrunk. In 2014, Liu Yuejin, who was then an academic at the University of International Relations (which has been linked to the Ministry of State Security),<sup>21</sup> argued that the distinctions between external and internal and between traditional and nontraditional security are now almost nonexistent.<sup>22</sup> In 2015, he was appointed to the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) as counterterrorism commissioner (vice-ministerial level). Former PAP deputy commander Wang Yongsheng cautioned in March 2015 that terrorist networks are simultaneously globalizing and localizing. Attacks are becoming more and more sophisticated, while at the same time growing numbers of “lone wolves” seek to commit atrocities.<sup>23</sup>

China’s policy prescription to address this disappearing gap between domestic and international security interests has been greater assertiveness overseas across all arms of the PRC security apparatus. In 2017, then minister of public security Guo Shengkun said that public security work is “internationalizing.”<sup>24</sup> The MPS counterterrorism commissioner Liu stated in September 2018 that his organization was ready to work with other countries’ law enforcement to

<sup>16</sup> “Qianzhan Likeqiang Tajikesitan zhi xing: Shen wa Zhong Ta hezuo dazao Shanghe Hezuo ‘xin zengzhang dian’ [Looking Forward to Li Keqiang’s Trip to Tajikistan: Deeply Tapping the Cooperation between China and Tajikistan to Create a “New Growth Point” for Shanghai Cooperation], China News Network, October 8, 2018, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/10-08/8644613.shtml>.

<sup>17</sup> Xi Jinping, “Tuanjie huzhu gongying tiaozhan tuidong Shanghai Hezuo zuzhi shixian xin kuayue” [Unity and Mutual Aid to Meet Challenges and Promote Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to Realize New Steps] (speech at the Council of Heads of State of the SCO, Ufa, July 10, 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmapp/content/2015-07/11/content\\_116809.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmapp/content/2015-07/11/content_116809.htm)).

<sup>18</sup> Joel Wuthnow, “Decoding China’s New ‘National Security Commission,’” CNA, November 2013, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/PPP-2013-U-006465-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/PPP-2013-U-006465-Final.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Rush Doshi, “Hu’s to Blame for China’s Foreign Assertiveness?” Brookings Institution, January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/hu-to-blame-for-chinas-foreign-assertiveness>.

<sup>20</sup> Xuetong Yan, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (2014): 160.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Mattis, “Assessing the Foreign Policy Influence of the Ministry of State Security,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 14, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, “Diplomatic Opportunities and Rising Threats: The Expanding Role of Non-traditional Security in Chinese Foreign and Security Policy,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 112 (2018): 613.

<sup>23</sup> Julia Famularo, “Fighting the Enemy with Fists and Daggers’: The Chinese Communist Party’s Counter-terrorism Policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR),” in *Terrorism and Counterterrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions*, ed. Michael Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56; and Zhanghua Jing Luo Zheng, “Wang Yongsheng: Wujing budui yijing chengwei guojia fankong hexin lilian” [Wang Yongsheng: The People’s Armed Police Has Become the Core Force of National Counterterrorism], *Jiefangjun Bao*, March 7, 2015, [http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2015-03/07/content\\_6384705.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2015-03/07/content_6384705.htm).

<sup>24</sup> “Quanguo Gong’an Guoji Hezuo Gongzuo Huiyi zai Jing Zhaokai” [National Public Security International Cooperation Work Conference Held in Beijing], Xinhua, February 7, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/07/c\\_1120426453.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-02/07/c_1120426453.htm).

“strengthen the combat and prevention of criminal activities and terrorist threats and carry out targeted joint operations.”<sup>25</sup>

However, the PAP seems most likely to build specific capabilities to undertake long-term overseas counterterrorism deployments.<sup>26</sup> Zhang Xiaoqi, the head of intelligence for the PAP, argued in September 2018 that “counter-terrorism preparations must follow the expansion of the country’s strategic interests.” He added, “We must strive to become a deterrent force to safeguard national security, a pioneering force to protect overseas interests and an elite force for universal fighting.”<sup>27</sup> This statement builds on comments in July 2018 by PAP commander Wang Ning that “the functions of the PAP are expanding from...stability maintenance to rights protection, from domestic to international.”<sup>28</sup> Zhou Jian, who is a professor at the PAP School of Politics, wrote in 2016 that “the PAP going abroad for counterterrorism is an irreplaceable strategy.”<sup>29</sup>

The combination of China’s new threat assessments in Tajikistan and new assertiveness in the security domain has manifested itself as a three-pronged approach to protect Chinese interests. This approach involves building capacity so that Tajikistan is more capable of maintaining domestic stability, deploying personnel in Tajikistan and Afghanistan to protect Chinese interests that local forces cannot, and aligning the security interests of the PRC and Tajikistan. The next three sections explore each part of this strategy.

## Chinese Capacity Building in Tajikistan

Since 2014, Chinese efforts to boost capacity for Tajikistan have focused on border force troops and civilian law-enforcement agencies. At the SCO Leaders’ Summit in 2014, Xi Jinping stated that the SCO should “comprehensively upgrade each country’s law-enforcement agencies’ capacity to maintain stability and control the situation.”<sup>30</sup> This is the first time that a Chinese leader at the SCO Leaders’ Summit called for building stability-maintenance capacity (*weiwēn nēnglǐ jiānshe*) for member countries.<sup>31</sup> Within a few years, bilateral statements also

<sup>25</sup> “Gongan Bu: Jiaqiang guoji zhifa anquan hezuo gongtong tisheng zhifa nengli” [Ministry of Public Security: Strengthening International Law Enforcement Security Cooperation and Improving Joint Law Enforcement Capabilities], Xinhua, September 13, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2018-09/13/c\\_1123426667.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2018-09/13/c_1123426667.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Timothy R. Heath, “China’s Pursuit of Overseas Security,” RAND Corporation, 2018, 36–37, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2271.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2271.html).

<sup>27</sup> Ben Bland and Nicolle Liu, “China Seeks Global Role for Elite Counter-terrorism Forces,” *Financial Times*, September 30, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/fad58218-c46d-11e8-8670-c5353379f7c2>.

<sup>28</sup> Ning Wang, “Shenru guan che Xi Zhuxi xunci jingshen nuli jianshe qiāngda de xiandaihua wuzhuang jingcha budui” [Thoroughly Implementing the Spirit of President Xi’s Instructions and Striving to Build a Strong Modern Armed Police Force], *Zhongguo wujing wang*, July 23, 2018, [http://wj.81.cn/content/2018-07/23/content\\_8097058.htm](http://wj.81.cn/content/2018-07/23/content_8097058.htm).

<sup>29</sup> Jian Zhou, “Wujing Budui chujing fankong you le falv yiju” [The Armed Police Force Has a Legal Basis for Going Abroad to Fight Terrorism], *Legal Daily*, January 28, 2016, [http://inews.ifeng.com/yidian/47266582/news.shtml?ch=ref\\_zbs\\_ydxx\\_news](http://inews.ifeng.com/yidian/47266582/news.shtml?ch=ref_zbs_ydxx_news).

<sup>30</sup> Xi Jinping, “Ningxin juli jingshen xiezuo tuidong Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi zai shang xin jietai” [Gathering People’s Will and Power and Coordinating Sincerely to Push the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to a New Level] (speech at the SCO Council of Heads of State meeting, Dushanbe, September 12, 2014), [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-09/12/c\\_1112464703.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-09/12/c_1112464703.htm). Note that the English version of the speech (released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) omitted the capacity-building language. See “Xi Jinping Attends SCO Summit in Dushanbe and Delivers Important Speech Stressing Gathering People’s Will and Power and Coordinating Sincerely to Push SCO to a New Level,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), September 12, 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/zjpcxshzccygsylshdsschybdtkstmedfslkydjxgsfw/t1191482.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/zjpcxshzccygsylshdsschybdtkstmedfslkydjxgsfw/t1191482.shtml).

<sup>31</sup> A more common formulation was that “protecting security and stability in Central Asia and each member country [of the SCO] is of the utmost importance,” and that SCO “leaders support the efforts of Central Asian countries to maintain peace, security, and stability in their own countries and regionally.” See “Hu Jintao chuxi Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi fenghui bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua” [Hu Jintao Attends the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit and Delivers an Important Speech], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), July 5, 2005, <http://www.fmoprc.gov.mo/chn/szyw/t202412.htm>.

stated the need to “strengthen cooperation on capacity building for law enforcement and security departments.”<sup>32</sup>

Although serious all-of-organization cooperation in any sphere is limited by the animosity between India and Pakistan, as well as tensions among Central Asian states, the SCO provides a multilateral venue to pursue bilateral capacity building. As a case in point, during the 2018 SCO Security Council Secretaries Meeting in Beijing, China’s minister of public security Zhao Kezhi met bilaterally with counterparts from all SCO countries except Russia but only mentioned capacity-building cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>33</sup> This demonstrates both that China is committed to capacity building with Tajikistan and that the policy is not organization-wide but rather a targeted attempt to boost capacity in what Beijing considers the most fragile SCO countries.

Capacity building with Tajikistan takes three forms—provision of new equipment and facilities, exercises, and training. Certainly, Chinese capacity-building efforts have increased, but they need to be kept in perspective. Training and exercises have only increased modestly. While the provision of equipment has grown, it is still mainly limited to nonlethal aid. In all three areas, China lags far behind Russia and in some ways is still behind the United States.

### *New Equipment and Facilities*

Prior to 2014, the PRC provided Tajikistan with small nonlethal security equipment like jeeps. Since then, it has increased both military and civilian security aid, but such aid is focused on the construction of new buildings and provision of nonlethal equipment on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

In 2016 the PRC provided a grant to build four new border posts, three commanders’ quarters, and a new training facility on the border.<sup>34</sup> The Tajik side was in charge of Chinese worker safety.<sup>35</sup> An anonymous Tajik official told the *Wall Street Journal* of secret agreements to build “30 to 40 guard posts on the Tajik side of the country’s border with Afghanistan.”<sup>36</sup> These deals remain unconfirmed. At this stage, there is no public evidence of 30 to 40 border posts being upgraded, but larger-scale reconstruction of Tajikistan’s border facilities is a plausible next step.

The MPS also funded the construction of a three-story building for the Tajik Drug Control Agency in Kulob in 2016 (approximately 40 kilometers from the Afghan border). China Jing An Import and Export Corporation, which is a major arms and materials supplier to China’s security

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<sup>32</sup> “Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo he Tajikesitan Gongheguo guanyu jianli quanmian huoban guanxi de lianhe shengming (quanwen)” [Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Tajikistan on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Full Text)], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), September 1, 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/t1488975.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/t1488975.shtml).

<sup>33</sup> “Zhao Kezhi fenbie huijian lai hua chuxi Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi chengyuanguo anquan huiyi mishu di shisanci huiyi de liu guo daibiaotuan tuanzhang” [Zhao Kezhi Met with the Six Heads of the Delegations Who Came to China to Attend the 13th Meeting of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Security Council Secretaries], *Xinhua*, May 21, 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-05/21/c\\_1122865947.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-05/21/c_1122865947.htm).

<sup>34</sup> “KNR vydelit Tadzhiistanu grant na ukrepleniye Tadzhiisko-Afganskoy granitsy” [PRC Will Allocate a Grant to Tajikistan to Strengthen the Tajik-Afghan Border], *Sputnik*, September 27, 2016, <https://ru.sputnik-tj.com/economy/20160927/1020739532.html>. Note that other sources came up with slightly different numbers. See Yuldashev, Avaz “Kitay postroit na Tadzhiisko-Afganskoy granitse 10 pogranzastav” [China Will Build 10 Border Posts on the Tajik-Afghan Border], *Asia-Plus*, November 14, 2016, <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20161114/kitay-postroit-na-tadzhiisko-afganskoi-granitse-14-obektov>.

<sup>35</sup> Mahmudjon Rahmatzoda, “Pogranpost ‘Gulkhan’ postroyen na Kitayskiye dengi” [The “Gulkan” Border Post Built with Chinese Money], *Radio Ozodi*, March 21, 2016, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/27625536.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Craig Nelson and Thomas Grove, “Russia, China Vie for Influence in Central Asia as U.S. Plans Afghan Exit,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-china-vie-for-influence-in-central-asia-as-u-s-plans-afghan-exit-11560850203>.

services, undertook the construction.<sup>37</sup> Not long after these facilities were built, Tajikistan's border force unveiled new Norinco VP-11 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (of which there are two visible in online photos) and Shaanxi Baoji Tiger vehicles (of which there are eight visible in online photos).<sup>38</sup> These were unveiled alongside dozens of armored Chrysler jeeps.

The PRC has not provided many weapons to Tajikistan, which either cannot afford or is unwilling to purchase Chinese systems. Beijing also has not provided weapons systems as military aid, possibly because Tajikistan has a greater need for basic facilities and transportation equipment. Russia provides much of the small arms required for border defense.

One issue facing China's provision of aid for capacity building is the institutional weakness of the Tajik security services. Pay is low, and sometimes even withheld, while hazing and desertion are commonplace. If troops are easily bribed or poorly motivated, they are less likely to perform in accordance with Beijing's interests. Tajikistan's border guard controls the drug routes from Afghanistan. New Chinese-built counternarcotics facilities will struggle to overcome this constraint.

Tajikistan's security services are particularly weak in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. In 2012, open fighting between the Special Forces of the Tajik army and local militias in Khorog led to the deaths of dozens on both sides.<sup>39</sup> In the end, the special forces, which the United States had trained and equipped, had to back down.<sup>40</sup> This highlights the limits of capacity building. The PAP is deployed to Gorno-Badakhshan.

Huawei, funded by a \$21 million loan from the Export-Import Bank of China, installed 870 cameras around Dushanbe in 2014 as part of a Safe City project to monitor traffic violations and public order.<sup>41</sup> Although Tajikistan's Ministry of the Interior was mostly interested in the revenue from fines, from Beijing's perspective the project allows Tajikistan's police to identify threats to stability more quickly, using what Huawei described as a command, control, and communications central integrated command platform. Huawei trained over 50 members of the Interior Ministry to use the system,<sup>42</sup> and it operates a separate annual program to train 10 government technology officials and 8 young technology experts in China every year.<sup>43</sup> Given that many MPS units in China use similar systems and receive training from Huawei, the Smart City system and training program potentially offer interoperability between Tajikistan's Ministry of the Interior and the MPS. It is unclear whether the other Chinese-built law-enforcement facilities include Chinese information and communications technology (ICT) systems. In other parts of the world, China has provided such systems when building security infrastructure.

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<sup>37</sup> "Zhongguo Gong'anbu yuan jian Tajikesitan Kuliyabu jindu fenshu bangonglou xiangmu jungong jiaojie" [The Ministry of Public Security of China Assisted in the Construction of the Office Building Project of the Kulyab Anti-drug Branch of Tajikistan], Xinhua, March 19, 2016, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-03/19/c\\_128814017.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-03/19/c_128814017.htm).

<sup>38</sup> "Bronetekhnika Kitayskogo proizvodstva v pogranichnykh voyskakh GKNB Tadjikistana" [Chinese-Made Armored Vehicles in the Border Troops of Tajikistan's GKNB], Live Journal, December 8, 2018, <https://bmpd.livejournal.com/3446169.html>.

<sup>39</sup> "Rivals for Authority in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan," International Crisis Group, Briefing, no. 87, March 14, 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/tajikistan/b87-rivals-authority-tajikistans-gorno-badakhshan>.

<sup>40</sup> Joshua Kucera, "The Tajiks Who Fight Their Own Government," *Atlantic*, June 28, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/06/the-tajiks-who-fight-their-own-government/277336>.

<sup>41</sup> Mehrangez Tursunzoda, "V Tadjikistane proyekt 'Bezopasnyy gorod' zarabotal 64 mln. somoni" [The "Safe City" Project in Tajikistan Earned 64 Million Somoni], *Asia-Plus*, July 22, 2016, <https://news.tj/news/tajikistan/laworder/20160722/v-tadjikistane-proekt-bezopasnyi-gorod-zarabotal-64-mln-somoni>.

<sup>42</sup> "Huawei zhuli Tajikesitan pingan chengshi jianshe" [Huawei Helps Tajikistan Build a Safe City], Huawei, February 9, 2015, <https://e.huawei.com/cn/case-studies/cn/2015/201502091636>.

<sup>43</sup> "Huawei Jishu Gongsi wei Tajikesitan peixun tongxun jishu zhuanjia" [Huawei Technologies Corporation Trains Communications Technology Experts in Tajikistan], Silk Road News Observation, May 7, 2018, <http://cms.siluxgc.com/tjk/20180507/13860.html>.

Russia, by contrast, has noticeably increased its provision of lethal weapons since around 2017, which in this author's judgment is partly a response to concerns over China's growing security role. In that year alone, Russia provided Tajikistan with \$122 million in free equipment, including T-72B1 tanks, BTR-80 and BTR-70 armored personnel carriers, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters, D-30 howitzers, and anti-aircraft mounts.<sup>44</sup> The U.S. provision of equipment and funding for facilities have declined since 2014, but the United States still provided nearly \$10 million in military assistance to Tajikistan in 2017 and 2018 combined, including for the construction of a new post on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.<sup>45</sup>

### Exercises

There have only ever been a handful of China-Tajikistan bilateral security exercises, but the frequency has increased since 2015. The first in 2006 was described by Dennis Blasko as "as rudimentary as an exercise can be."<sup>46</sup> In 2015, Tajik and Chinese special operations forces conducted joint counterterrorism drills at a mountain training center outside Dushanbe. This was the first time the MPS special operations forces conducted training exercises overseas. The exercises lasted two days and involved over one hundred Chinese personnel. Coordination 2016 involved four days of counterterrorism exercises on the Afghan-Tajik border in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. A small mobile company of 414 PLA troops joined a large contingent of Tajik troops, numbering up to ten thousand, according to some on the Tajik side.<sup>47</sup> Another joint exercise involving a PLA company in Gorno-Badakhshan was reportedly to be held in late July 2019, but it had not taken place at the time of writing.<sup>48</sup>

Multilaterally, Tajikistan and China participate together in the military SCO Peace Missions, which have been held in 2003, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. However, Tajikistan's participation in these exercises has been modest.<sup>49</sup> On the civilian side the exercises are more diverse. They include the following:

- Humanitarian exercises were held in 2013 and 2015. They were headed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, with the MPS contributing firefighters and security personnel.
- SCO cybersecurity exercises were held in 2015 and 2017 in Xiamen and will presumably be held every two years into the future. The information on these exercises is limited, but they were focused on the cyber element of counterterrorism. Given the fraught relationship between India and Pakistan, cooperation among all SCO countries is unlikely. Nonetheless, this exercise could form the basis for future bilateral or minilateral cooperation on cybersecurity.
- Irregular counterterrorism exercises involving China, Tajikistan, and some combination of other SCO members have been conducted.

<sup>44</sup> "Russian Arms and Military Equipment Delivered to Tajikistan—Defense Ministry," TASS, December 19, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/981765>.

<sup>45</sup> Joshua Kucera, "U.S. Planned Big Boost in Military Aid to Tajikistan," Eurasianet, January 11, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/us-planned-big-boost-in-military-aid-to-tajikistan>; and "U.S. Embassy Hands over Border Post at Ushturmullo in Shahritous District," Asia-Plus, December 3, 2018, <https://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/security/20181203/us-embassy-hands-over-border-post-at-ushturmullo-in-shahritous-district>.

<sup>46</sup> Dennis Blasko, "People's Liberation Army and People's Armed Police Ground Exercises with Foreign Forces, 2002–2009," in *The PLA at Home and Abroad: Assessing the Operational Capabilities of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 379–403.

<sup>47</sup> "ZhongTa juxing 'Xiezuo-2016' lianhe fankong yanxi" [China and Tajikistan Held "Collaboration-2016" Joint Anti-terrorism Exercise], China Ministry of Defense, October 25, 2016, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2016-10/25/content\\_4752612.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/topnews/2016-10/25/content_4752612.htm); and U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC), "USCC 2016 Annual Report," November 2016.

<sup>48</sup> "Tajikistan, China to Hold Another Joint Military Drill in Pamirs," Eurasianet, July 9, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-china-to-hold-another-joint-military-drill-in-pamirs>.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Urchick, "What We Learned from Peace Mission 2018," *Small Wars Journal*, October 3, 2018.



Tajikistan, Russia, and the PRC have never held a trilateral security exercise. Russia has stepped up its bilateral exercises with Tajikistan since 2015 when it became obvious that the PRC was boosting its activities.<sup>50</sup> Russia also frequently engages Tajikistan in multilateral exercises without China. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) hosts three annual multilateral security exercises that involve Tajikistan.<sup>51</sup> The CSTO and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries also hold other ad hoc multilateral exercises involving both Russia and Tajikistan.<sup>52</sup>

### Training

China seeks to boost training for Tajik security personnel. So far only modest increases have occurred since BRI was launched, but there are plans for larger training programs. The biggest gains have been in civilian training, which reflects Xi's stated aim to boost "stability maintenance capacity." A December 2018 article published in a Chinese state-owned newspaper quoted an anonymous MPS official who stated that the MPS has trained nearly 20,000 foreign law enforcement officials from more than 80 countries in just over ten years.<sup>53</sup> That might sound like a lot, but it amounts to only 25 people per country per year. Obviously, that number is not uniformly distributed. Public data is not available for the number of Tajik officials trained by the MPS, but reports suggest that perhaps dozens are trained per year, with a strong focus on senior officials.

In 2014, the MPS established the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation in Shanghai, which is a specialized institute to train SCO officials. The center claims to have trained over 300 cadres from SCO states between 2014 and June 2018—an average of 67 per year (counting the period as four and a half years).<sup>54</sup> An unknown subset of those would be from Tajikistan. The Internal Affairs Ministry of Tajikistan has approximately 30,000 personnel.<sup>55</sup> Courses typically last one or two weeks and are almost exclusively composed of senior personnel.<sup>56</sup> MPS training focuses on topics like reconnaissance, technology, counterterrorism, counternarcotics, cybersecurity, or transnational crime.<sup>57</sup> The center planned to train 2,000 cadres from all SCO countries over three years starting from June 2018.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation, organizations affiliated with the MPS also conduct mainly short-term training courses for

<sup>50</sup> Chris Rickleton, "Tajikistan and Russia in Pamir Military Drills First," Eurasianet, July 17, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/tajikistan-and-russia-in-pamir-military-drills-first>; "Joint Russian-Tajik Tactical Drills Kick Off Near Dushanbe," TASS, March 19, 2019, <https://tass.com/defense/1049259>; and "Russia, Tajikistan Hold Joint Anti-terror Drill," Xinhua, March 18, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/28/c\\_136162344.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/28/c_136162344.htm).

<sup>51</sup> Marcel de Haas, "War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!" *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29, no. 3 (2016): 392–97.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> "Woguo gongan jiguan zhuli tisheng quanqiu zhifa nengli" [China's Public Security Organizations Help Improve Global Law-Enforcement Capabilities], *Legal Daily*, September 16, 2018, [http://www.legaldaily.com.cn/index\\_article/content/2018-09/16/content\\_7646184.htm?node=5955](http://www.legaldaily.com.cn/index_article/content/2018-09/16/content_7646184.htm?node=5955).

<sup>54</sup> "Shanghai Zhengfa Xueyuan reyi Xi Jinping Zhuxi Qingdao fenghui zai ti Shanghe peixun jidi" [Shanghai University of Political Science and Law Robustly Debates Xi Jinping Again Mentioning the SCO Training Base during the Qingdao Summit], China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation, June 10, 2018, <http://cnisco.shupl.edu.cn/html/dtxw/2018/06/10/15db71a9-024b-425c-9e16-6acd532cff50.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence P. Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 79.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see "Shanghe Fenghu zhiji, Tajikesitan Neiwubu 'san zhou yi shi' neiwuju lingdao yanxiuban zai Shaghe jidi yuanman jieye" [At the SCO Leadership Summit, Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs Successfully Completed the "Three Provinces One City" Internal Affairs Leadership Course at the SCO Training Base], China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation, June 10, 2018, <http://cnisco.shupl.edu.cn/html/dtxw/2018/06/10/199237d2-fdc3-4b0c-bea1-64c24ab01743.html>.

<sup>57</sup> "2018 nian Tajikesitan jindu zhifa peixunban zai woyuan jieye" [The 2018 Tajikistan Counternarcotics Law-Enforcement Training Course Was Completed at Shandong Police Academy], Shandong Police College, July 21, 2018, <http://www.sdpc.edu.cn/info/1024/9522.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> "Shanghai Zhengfa Xueyuan reyi Xi Jinping Zhuxi Qingdao fenghui zai ti Shanghe peixun jidi."

Tajik law enforcement. There are intermittent reports of groups of around fifteen undertaking short-term training in China.<sup>59</sup> The PAP also conducts limited training for Tajik officials.<sup>60</sup> Dozens of PLA academies also train foreign officers in both short-term and long-term programs.<sup>61</sup> Although public records show that small groups and individuals from Tajikistan attend these institutions,<sup>62</sup> little public evidence exists to show that the number of citizens receiving training from PLA academies is increasing. Unlike on the civilian side, there is no new academy specifically for SCO countries.

Other nations provide significant training to Tajikistan's security services as well. As of 2014, 70% of officers in the country's special operations forces graduated from Russian military institutes.<sup>63</sup> Russia's border guard trains the Tajik border guard,<sup>64</sup> and Russia trained 1,000 Tajik military personnel at its 201st base in southern Tajikistan between 2015 and 2018.<sup>65</sup> This number is significant, given that the entire Tajik military numbers only 20,000 people. In the 2016 fiscal year, the United States trained 540 troops from Tajikistan. The Department of Defense budgeted for the training of 1,200 Tajik special forces troops in 2017, but it is unclear whether this actually occurred.<sup>66</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and India also provide some level of security training to Tajikistan.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, the PRC seeks to boost the capacity of Tajikistan to maintain domestic stability and thus has prioritized building the capacity of the country's border guard and civilian security personnel. Funding for new facilities and the provision of equipment have focused on both areas, while modest training increases have concentrated on civilian officials.

## Joint Operations and PAP Deployment

Joint operations allow the PRC to play a role where gaps exist in Tajikistan's capacity to protect Chinese security interests. There appears to be a relatively clear delineation of roles for the PAP, PLA, and MPS at this stage. The PAP is in charge of counterterrorism efforts (reconnaissance

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, "2016 nian Tajikesitan Neiwubu xingzhen jishu peixunban zai woyuan kaiban" [In 2016, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan's Criminal Investigation Technical Training Course Was Held in Our School], Criminal Investigation Police University of China, July 1, 2016, <http://news.cipuc.edu.cn/info/1030/15279.htm>; "Tajikesitan guoanwei fankong peixunban zai woyuan kaiban" [Tajikistan National Security Committee Counterterrorism Training Course Begins at Our Institution], Criminal Investigation Police University of China, June 26, 2014, <http://news.cipuc.edu.cn/info/1030/11255.htm>; and "Tajikesitan Neiwu jiguan lingdao yanxiuban jieye dianli zai woxiao longzhong juxing" [The Graduation Ceremony for the Tajikistan Internal Affairs Organ Leadership Training Course Was Held at Our Institute], Gansu Institute of Political Science and Law, November 21, 2017, <http://www.gsl.edu.cn/info/1087/5469.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> "Shanghe Fenghu zhiji, Tajikesitan Neiwubu 'san zhou yi shi' neiwuju lingdao yanxiuban zai Shaghe jidi yuanman jieye."

<sup>61</sup> David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81–83.

<sup>62</sup> "Fangwu Xueyuan wei Tajikesitan Xueyuan juxing junxian jinsheng yishi" [Defense Academy Holds a Rank Promotion Ceremony for Tajikistan Students], International College of Defense Studies, November 27, 2013, [http://www.cdsndu.org/html\\_ch/to\\_articleContent\\_article.id=8a28e6d84b09c34b014b0a4d6aff0067.html](http://www.cdsndu.org/html_ch/to_articleContent_article.id=8a28e6d84b09c34b014b0a4d6aff0067.html).

<sup>63</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, "External Support for Central Asian Military and Security Forces," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Working Paper, January 2014, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-OSFno1WP.pdf>; and Sebastien Peyrouse, "Russia—Central Asia: Advances and Shortcomings of the Military Partnership," in *Central Asian Security Trends: Views from Europe and Russia*, ed. Stephen Blank (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011), 8.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> "Rossiyskiye voyennosluzhashchiye podgotovili okolo 1000 mladshikh spetsialistov dlya Vooruzhennykh sil Tadjikistana" [Russian Servicemen Trained about 1,000 Junior Specialists for the Armed Forces of Tajikistan], Rambler, August 24, 2018, <https://woman.rambler.ru/children/40634577-rossiyskie-voennosluzhaschie-podgotovili-okolo-1000-mladshih-spetsialistov-dlya-vooruzhennykh-sil-tadjikistana>.

<sup>66</sup> Joshua Kucera, "U.S. Planned Big Boost in Military Aid to Tajikistan," Eurasianet, January 11, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/us-planned-big-boost-in-military-aid-to-tajikistan>.

<sup>67</sup> Gorenburg, "External Support for Central Asian Military and Security Forces"; and "U.S. Embassy Trains Tajikistan's Law Enforcement Officers," Ministry of Internal Affairs (Tajikistan), November 16, 2018, <http://mvd.tj/index.php/en/international-cooperation/21912-saforati-ima-afsaroni-ma-omoti-ifzi-u-u-1-to-ikistonro-meom-zonad-3%20>.

patrols in remote areas), the PLA could potentially be called on in a crisis, and the MPS is responsible for discussions on project protection and traditional law-enforcement cooperation that may lead to operations in the future.

Since 2016, PAP personnel have been based south of Shaymak in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region near the confluence of the Afghanistan-PRC-Tajikistan borders.<sup>68</sup> Asia-Plus quotes an anonymous source from Tajikistan's military who says that the facility is a Chinese-financed border post under Tajik command but housing Chinese personnel.<sup>69</sup> This claim, however, is difficult to verify. From this facility (whoever commands it), the PAP patrols both the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region and the Wakhan Corridor jointly with local forces.<sup>70</sup>

The autonomous region makes up 45% of Tajikistan's territory but only contains around 3% of its population. In addition, much of the terrain is over 3,000 meters above sea level. Tajik security forces are thus spread thin in this area. The same is true of Afghanistan's forces in the Wakhan Corridor.

The purpose of the deployment seems to be to conduct reconnaissance in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region and the Wakhan Corridor to ensure that terrorists are prevented from traveling to regions near the PRC border. The Wakhan Corridor has no roads to China, while the Chinese border with the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region only has one road crossing, which is well policed on the PRC side. The area is mountainous and would be difficult to cross on foot. But the Chinese government has decided that the border must be completely secure. The fact that the PRC has put personnel on Tajik soil suggests a lack of confidence in Afghan and Tajik forces to undertake that role. There is long-standing discontent in Gorno-Badakhshan toward the Tajik government, which has occasionally resulted in violence. The PAP deployment is small and located well away from major population centers, suggesting that it is not designed to deal with domestic conflict. That may be a contingency in the future but not now.

According to an unnamed Tajik official, "There are parts of the country where the Chinese have taken over border control completely." He added, "They patrol on their own, in their own vehicles."<sup>71</sup> These activities remain unconfirmed. If true, it would likely be in Gorno-Badakhshan, where PAP personnel have been spotted and Tajik coverage is sparse. If PAP personnel were operating along other parts of the border, they would be noticed and photographed by tourists or locals before too long. That has not yet happened. Border operations beyond Gorno-Badakhshan are unlikely in the short term. That part of the border is better covered by the Tajik border service, and such operations would annoy the Russians. Chinese patrols there would also be an operational step-change because they would involve heavily trafficked sections of the border.

The PRC deployment in Tajikistan is probably staffed with only PAP personnel. But the PLA and PAP likely communicate on the PAP's activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The author bases this view on the following fragmentary evidence. First, when China's operations in Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor came to light in late 2016, the PAP was under the dual administration of the

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<sup>68</sup> A report from the *Washington Post* showed a photo of one of the PAP personnel. The uniform had a red collar insignia, which looks like a PAP chief sergeant fourth class. See Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/amphtml/world/asia\\_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/amphtml/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html).

<sup>69</sup> "The *Washington Post* prinyala tadhikskuyu pogranzastavu v Murgabe za voyennyy obyek Kitaya—Istochnik" [The *Washington Post* Assumed the Tajik Frontier Post in Murgab Was a Chinese Military Site—Source], Asia-Plus, February 21, 2019, <https://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20190221/the-washington-post-prinyala-tadhikskuyu-pogranzastavu-v-murgabe-za-voennii-obekt-kitaya-istochnik>.

<sup>70</sup> "The Ultimate Guide to the Afghanistan Wakhan Valley and Pamir."

<sup>71</sup> Nelson and Grove, "Russia, China Vie for Influence in Central Asia as U.S. Plans Afghan Exit."

MPS and Central Military Commission (CMC). That has since changed, and most of the PAP's functions are now under the sole administration of the CMC. In 2015 the PLA also established the PLA Overseas Operations Office to "direct and coordinate overseas operations" for both the PLA and PAP.<sup>72</sup> This would likely extend to PAP operations in Tajikistan.

Second, the PLA and PAP train for contingencies that could apply to Tajikistan or the Afghan Wakhan. Wang Ning, who is an ally of Xi Jinping and was shifted from the PLA to command the PAP, said that "[PAP] Special Forces need to be the sharp edge of counterterrorism with air forces for effective support."<sup>73</sup> Wang has experience overseeing PLA exercises in Central Asia, having directed the Peace Mission exercise held in August 2014, only months before he joined the PAP.<sup>74</sup> The PAP personnel in Tajikistan are from Xinjiang, where they conduct counterterrorism exercises with the PLA.<sup>75</sup> Some of these exercises involve joint air support between the PLA, the PAP, and civilian carriers. In February 2017, for example, eight PLA helicopters, ten civilian aircraft, and an unknown number of PAP aircraft conducted a rapid-response exercise that moved thousands of PAP and PLA troops to locations throughout Xinjiang, including the Tianshan Mountains (which traverse the China-Tajikistan border).<sup>76</sup>

Third, the timing of meetings in early 2016 suggests that Fang Fenghui of the PLA and CMC was involved in initial discussions for the deployment, though he was later purged in the anticorruption campaign. During a meeting with Tajik president Rahmon in Beijing in late February 2016, Fang said that "China is willing to further enhance military cooperation and multilateral counter-terrorism collaboration with Tajikistan."<sup>77</sup> He had a meeting with Afghan president Ashraf Ghani just a couple of days later, which was around the time that trilateral operations started.

Although the PRC has personnel in Tajikistan, it still lags a long way behind Russia. The Russian military base in Tajikistan encompasses three facilities in Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob—all far from the PAP's deployment in Gorno-Badakhshan. Most of the approximately seven thousand Russian troops are stationed in Dushanbe. Russia also operates the Okno space surveillance complex, located near Nurek, which detects and tracks ballistic missiles aimed at Russia and Central Asia.

China and Tajikistan have conducted surprisingly few joint patrols on their shared border. Joint border patrols were mentioned by state media in September 2016, September 2017, and May 2019.<sup>78</sup> However, the photos and videos published indicated ritualized exercises rather than serious operations. By contrast, China has conducted many publicly acknowledged border

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<sup>72</sup> "PLA Sets Up Overseas Operations Office to Strengthen Overseas Rapid Reaction," China Military Online, March 25, 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content\\_6977517.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-03/25/content_6977517.htm).

<sup>73</sup> "Yi tezhao liliang wei fankong jiandao, yi kongzhong liliang wei gaoxiao zhiyuan" [China's Armed Police Force Reform Timetable Announced How to Build in the Future], Sina, July 2, 2018, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2018-07-02/doc-ihespqry3753669.shtml>.

<sup>74</sup> "Jiefangjun yuan fu zong canmou zhang Wang Ning lu xin wujing budui siling yuan, yu Wang Jianping duidiao" [Wang Ning, Former Deputy Chief of Staff of the PLA, Commander of the New Armed Police Force, and Wang Jianping], *Pengpai News*, December 31, 2014, [http://m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey\\_detail.jsp?contid=1290466&from=wifiKey](http://m.thepaper.cn/wifiKey_detail.jsp?contid=1290466&from=wifiKey).

<sup>75</sup> See Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands."

<sup>76</sup> "Xinjiang Wujing Budui Kongzhong tousong shuqian bingli jinxing fankong yanlian" [Xinjiang Armed Police Force Airlifts Thousands of Troops to Undertake Counterterrorism Exercises], *Guanchazhe*, February, 28, 2017, [https://www.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2017\\_02\\_28\\_396416.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/military-affairs/2017_02_28_396416.shtml).

<sup>77</sup> Jianing Yao, "Tajikistan, China to Boost Defense, Anti-terrorism Cooperation," Xinhua, March 1, 2016, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-03/01/content\\_6934425.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-03/01/content_6934425.htm).

<sup>78</sup> "ZhongTa bianfang guanbing kaizhan lianhe xunluo quebao bianjing wending" [Chinese and Tajik Central Tower Border Guards and Soldiers Conduct Joint Patrols to Ensure Border Stability], Ministry of Defense (PRC), September 18, 2017, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2017-09/18/content\\_4792175\\_5.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2017-09/18/content_4792175_5.htm); and "Lianhe Xunluo" [Joint Patrols], *Renmin Ribao*, May 24, 2019, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2019-05/24/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20190524\\_4-11.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2019-05/24/nw.D110000renmrb_20190524_4-11.htm).

patrols with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; thus, lack of willingness from the Chinese side is most likely not the reason. Since 2010, the PLA has conducted annual joint patrols with the Kyrgyz military in the areas near Torugart Pass, and in 2013 the frequency of these patrols increased to three times per year.<sup>79</sup> In 2015, MPS border control units from the Kizilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture—which are equivalent to a PLA regiment—held six days of joint patrols with Kyrgyz border defense guards from Osh.<sup>80</sup> In Kazakhstan, military border units have likewise been undertaking joint patrols with China since 2003 and now undertake what are referred to as “joint operations” on the border.<sup>81</sup> Multiple MPS border units have also undertaken patrols with their Kazakh counterparts since 2016.<sup>82</sup> One possible explanation for the lack of patrols with Tajikistan is the small number of Tajik personnel in the area, which is unlikely to change. The PAP patrols can be seen as a response.

The MPS is pushing for traditional law-enforcement operations, which have not yet been conducted on Tajik soil. During SCO meetings in Beijing and Qingdao in May 2018, the MPS counterterrorism commissioner, Liu Yuejin, and the deputy security general of the National Narcotics Control Commission, Wei Xiaojun, said that SCO countries need to deploy joint operations to combat drug trafficking, boost capacity, and increase personnel training and technological exchange.<sup>83</sup> MPS officials had previously mentioned joint operational capacity and joint operations at SCO meetings, but their statements were more coordinated in 2018.<sup>84</sup> While they have promoted the policy at the SCO, actual joint operations would likely be bilateral.

## Alignment of Security Interests

China is working to align the security interests of many BRI participant countries. Xi Jinping stated at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, “We should foster the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security, and create a security environment built and shared by all.”<sup>85</sup> A Xinhua readout from a bilateral meeting in June 2019 between Rahmon and Xi states that both sides committed “to build a China-Tajikistan community of security step by step.”<sup>86</sup> Implementing this vision in Tajikistan means aligning interests on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border and protecting the Line D gas pipeline when (or if) it opens in 2024. Building facilities such as border

<sup>79</sup> “Zhongji bianfang guanbing juxing jinnian shouci lianhe xunluo” [China and Kyrgyzstan Border Guards Conduct First Joint Patrol of the Year], Sina, June 8, 2014, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2014-06-08/0400783478.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Geshe Zhao, “Zhongguo yu Jierjisitan shouci bianjing lianhe zhifa” [China and Kyrgyzstan Conduct First Joint Law-Enforcement Activity], *People’s Daily*, June 16, 2015, <http://qh.people.com.cn/n/2015/0616/c182778-25255111.html>.

<sup>81</sup> “ZhongHa lianhe qingshan qingbian tacha daji kuajing weifa huodong” [China-Kazakhstan Joint Mountain and Border Inspections Crack Down on Illegal Cross-Border Activity], Xinhua, September 6, 2016, [http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160906/49924121\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160906/49924121_0.shtml); and “ZhongHa qidong ‘Tuanjie 2016’ bian fang lianhe zhifa xingdong” [China and Kazakhstan Begin Joint Border Security Enforcement Operation “Unity 2016”], Xinhua, October 13, 2016.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> “Zhao Kezhi he Shanghe Zuzhi mishuzhang gong jian jizhe jiu xieshou yingdui anquan weixie he tiaozhan dacheng guangfan gongshi” [Zhao Kezhi and the Secretary General of the SCO Have Met with Reporters to Reach a Broad Consensus on Collaboration to Deal with Security Threats and Challenges], China News, May 22, 2018, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/05-22/8520239.shtml>.

<sup>84</sup> “Liu Yuejin zai Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi chengyuanguo jindu bumen lingdaoren di ba ci huiyi shang qiangdiao gonggu jindu hezuo chengguo fengfu wushi hezuo neihan wei renlei jiankang chuanguo gengduo fuzhi” [At the Eighth Meeting of the Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Counter-Narcotics Agencies, Liu Yuejin Emphasized the Results of the Counter-Narcotics Cooperation and the Enrichment of Pragmatic Cooperation in Order to Create Better Well-Being for the Health of Humankind and People of All Countries], Ministry of Public Security (PRC), May 18, 2018, <http://news.cpd.com.cn/n3559/c41181836/content.html>.

<sup>85</sup> “Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum,” Xinhua, May 14, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c\\_136282982.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm).

<sup>86</sup> “China, Tajikistan Agree to Deepen Ties for Common Prosperity,” Xinhua, May 16, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/16/c\\_138146465.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/16/c_138146465.htm).

watchtowers is one element of the PRC's plan. Joint operations also shift Tajik and Afghan security resources to areas of interest to China.

In addition to pursuing these general strategies, Beijing has adopted specific tools to realign security interests. The first are economic. This happened before the launch of BRI, but the initiative's renewed focus on projects that are important sources of budgetary revenues and foreign exchange aligns security views more closely than building roads. In particular, Tajikistan's budgetary revenues will be aligned to China's energy security.

Second, the PRC is actively pushing measures to protect its projects both bilaterally and multilaterally through the SCO. In 2014, Xi mentioned the protection of oil and gas pipelines at the SCO Leaders' Summit.<sup>87</sup> This was the same trip during which he announced the building of Line D. Guo Shengkun, who was then the state counselor in charge of public security (as well as minister of public security), told his Tajik counterpart in 2016 that China would like to improve security cooperation on large-scale projects in Tajikistan.<sup>88</sup> Recent visits by Chinese ambassadors to PRC projects have included inspections of security measures.<sup>89</sup> This was not common previously.

Finally, Beijing has launched new security forums, mechanisms, and dialogues focused on Eurasia and Africa since 2015. The ones that matter to Tajikistan are the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, which started in 2016 and focuses on counterterrorism; the MPS-led Lianyungang Forum, which started in 2015 and focuses on transnational security; and the International Cooperation Conference on Transnational Oil and Gas Pipelines, which has been held as a part of the Lianyungang Forum since 2017.<sup>90</sup> At the inaugural conference in 2017, it was clear that Tajikistan was a priority country. Representatives from 35 countries attended the meeting, but the vice minister of the MPS, Huang Ming, only met bilaterally with representatives from Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>91</sup> Although plans to protect Line D are still being worked out, a program to train one thousand people, including four hundred law-enforcement officials, from all countries was announced at the second iteration of the meeting in June 2018.<sup>92</sup> There are few other details at this stage.

The Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism includes Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan and is the main forum for multilateral security dialogue between China and Afghanistan, which is not a full member of the SCO. This forum is likely where the PAP's joint operations will be discussed. Similar to other PRC groupings, it probably functions as a multilateral shell for bilateral and minilateral cooperation due to the tense relationship between the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

<sup>87</sup> "Xi Jinping zai Shanghai Hezuo Zuzhi chengyuanguo yuanshou lishihui di shisi ci huiyi shang de jianghua (quanwen)" [Speech by Xi Jinping at the Fourteenth Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Full Text)], Xinhua, September 12, 2014, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-09/12/c\\_1112464703.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-09/12/c_1112464703.htm).

<sup>88</sup> "Guo Shengyu yu Tajikesitan neiwubu buzhang juxing huitan" [Guo Shengyu Holds Talks with the Minister of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan], Xinhua, February 25, 2016, [http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-02/25/content\\_5046305.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-02/25/content_5046305.htm).

<sup>89</sup> "Zhu Tajikesitan dashi Yuebin fu Zhongguo zhongxing jixie gongsi zai Tajikesitan xiangmu xunshi kaocha" [Yue Bin Fu, Chinese Ambassador to Tajikistan, Inspected China Heavy Machinery Company's Tajikistan Project], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), April 21, 2017, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn//gxxh/tyb/zwbdt/jghd/t1455585.htm>.

<sup>90</sup> "Disan jie Lianyungang Luntan ji shoujie kuaguo youqi guandao guoji anbao hezuo huiyi chenggong zhaokai Huang Ming chuxi huiyi bing youguan guojia zhifa bumen fuzeren" [The 3rd Lianyungang Forum and the First International Security Cooperation Conference for Transnational Oil and Gas Pipelines Were Successfully Held, Huang Ming Attended the Meeting and Met with the Heads of Law-Enforcement Agencies of Relevant Countries], *Renmin Gonggan Bao*, December 12, 2017, <http://news.cpd.com.cn/n3559/c39973494/content.html>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Zhao Enze, "Lianyungang Luntan cujin guoji zhifa anquan hezuo rang xin Ouya da luqiao chengwei 'pingan dadao'" [Lianyungang Forum Promotes International Law-Enforcement Security Cooperation Which Allows the New Eurasian Continental Bridge to Become the "Avenue of Peacefulness"], *People's Daily*, June 13, 2018, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2018-06/13/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20180613\\_2-16.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2018-06/13/nw.D110000renmrb_20180613_2-16.htm).

## Conclusion

China's main interest in Tajikistan is for the country to remain stable. This is not new. But Beijing's assessment of the threat to this interest has changed. It now sees two interrelated challenges to stability. The first is the threat of violence spilling over from Afghanistan. The second is the limitations on the ability of the civilian security forces to handle law enforcement.

China has made a serious effort to increase its security engagement with Tajikistan since around 2014. This has focused on capacity building for civilian law enforcement and the border service, security alignment, and joint operations on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, which reflects Chinese interests. It also indicates that the PRC's efforts in Tajikistan and the Wakhan Corridor are about keeping violence hemmed into Afghanistan. Beijing will happily facilitate dialogue between different parties in Afghanistan, but it will not make a serious security contribution in that country.

China is not concerned about Russia's presence in Tajikistan. The seven thousand Russian troops in the country do not threaten Chinese interests and could play a security role should violence actually spill over from Afghanistan. Russia, however, is concerned about China's presence because it wants to maintain security primacy in the region. Hence, the two sides largely operate parallel to each other.

Beijing remains skeptical of Tajikistan's capacity to keep instability in Afghanistan from spilling over. As a result, PRC leaders have made the decision to send security personnel to conduct reconnaissance missions on both sides of the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border, but only in the region closest to China. This is the area where Tajikistan's security coverage is weakest.

At this stage, there is a division of labor between China's security services. The MPS handles traditional law-enforcement cooperation and coordinates with Tajikistan on project protection. The PAP undertakes beyond-the-border joint reconnaissance patrols, with the PLA potentially available for contingencies such as noncombatant evacuations. This division allows each section of China's security apparatus to develop relationships with its counterpart in Tajikistan and potentially co-opt it into protecting China's security interests. The MPS pushes Tajikistan's Interior Ministry to consider protection of Chinese projects in that country. This will be pertinent if Line D is completed. The deployment of the PAP instead of the PLA allows Beijing to maintain the appearance that the Chinese military is not active in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Tajikistan is after all a relatively stable country, so China remains worried about potential threats rather than actual activities that have already occurred. Beijing's ongoing response will be driven by the goal of maintaining stability. This means that its main course of action will be to continue to boost capacity and to co-opt Tajikistan's security services. Joint operations will be considered where or when Beijing deems local capacity insufficient, such as in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region or in the event of a threat to Line D.





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# China's Private Security Companies: The Evolution of a New Security Actor

*Alessandro Arduino*

**ALESSANDRO ARDUINO** is the Co-director of the Security and Crisis Management International Centre at the Shanghai Academy of Social Science and the External Affiliate in the Lau China Institute at King's College London. Dr. Arduino can be reached at <ardualex@gmail.com>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay discusses the evolution of a new security actor—Chinese private security companies (PSCs)—and examines how PSCs guard Chinese interests abroad.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which crosses many geographic borders, is expanding rapidly. As BRI spreads around the globe, the country must address a new set of problems and risks. Primary among these is the fact that China is now deepening its economic and personnel footprint in countries with serious political and security problems. An alternative pathway for the deployment of armed forces is the expansion of the Chinese private security industry. The purpose of this industry is to help Chinese state-owned enterprises protect themselves in dangerous places. Stimulated by BRI, the evolution of PSCs with "Chinese characteristics" will greatly affect China's military-security plans and posture. From civil-military relations to the competition among ministries and government organizations to regulate the privatization of security, the future of Chinese PSCs is intertwined with the modernization of the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The central government needs to work with regulators to adopt a comprehensive code of conduct to safeguard not only Chinese infrastructure and personnel but a broad range of stakeholders.
- China needs to promote sophisticated risk analysis and mitigation, especially when cooperating with third countries in infrastructure investments. Security incidents abroad involving Chinese PSCs have direct political consequences due to the blurred distinction between public and private in China.
- The international community needs to monitor the interaction between Chinese and international private military security companies from the U.S. and Russia and promote the transparency and accountability of Chinese PSCs.
- The Western powers need to closely monitor the impact of the Chinese private security sector on China's military security doctrine and global force projection.

President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of the most ambitious infrastructure initiatives ever launched. Its massive scale will create commercial opportunities for a wide range of companies and service providers around the world. Yet, in addition to creating new investments, enabling trade, and increasing China's economic clout, Chinese leaders and all the stakeholders involved—state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and companies in the private sector—need to address countless risks. These risks include currency inconvertibility, lack of transparency, sovereign credit risk, repudiation of contractual agreements, asset nationalization, cyberattacks, terrorism, civil war, riots, and strikes. The solutions to these problems require thorough assessment and appropriate management of risk.

Protecting BRI through the use of private security companies (PSCs) requires a wide range of security services along both the land routes (the belt) and the maritime corridors (the road). Chinese companies openly acknowledge that there are numerous risks associated with FDI in emerging economies, but there is still a lack of analysis of how to bridge the gap between perceived risks and real threats. Inadequate oversight, miscalculation of political risks, and limited appreciation of the threat of criminal violence are still common in project assessments for BRI. While SOEs in the energy and information communications technology (ICT) sectors are quite adept in assessing and managing their personnel security, private companies that are engaging for the first time in high-risk areas are unwilling to invest in costly but necessary risk assessments or security measures. At the same time, Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises that work as subcontractors for SOEs are not able to invest in a proper security apparatus due to low profit margins. Furthermore, SOEs and private companies often receive limited support from the host nation's public security forces and are largely left to their own devices in times of crisis. The evolution of security requirements as these companies expand their operations under BRI, which has already motivated profound changes in China's military and security doctrine and posture, will have an impact on China's global force projection and capabilities. These trends highlight several issues that still must be addressed within the context of BRI: how Chinese firms will provide security along the initiative's land and maritime routes, how these companies can benefit from interactions with international PSCs, and whether PSCs will formalize their relationships with the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

This essay examines these and other security issues related to BRI and the rise of the Chinese private security sector. It begins by illustrating the ongoing evolution of the sector and the steep learning curve that makes it dependent on foreign expertise. The essay also illustrates the physical security requirements for Chinese personnel and assets and the related guidelines for risk assessment and management in BRI countries. The essay then discusses the possible evolution and expansion overseas of Chinese PSCs that are able to learn and adapt their operations in hostile foreign areas.

## The Need to Secure BRI Projects: The Role of the Private Sector

Most analysts tend to measure Chinese influence in BRI countries in economic or political terms. There is, however, a security dimension that is fundamentally different from the conventional expectation that a government will send in the army when its nationals encounter

security problems overseas.<sup>1</sup> Given the vast distance of BRI routes, a growing number of Chinese SOEs are operating in very challenging security environments, such as areas affected by armed conflicts, social tensions, organized crime, and weak and predatory governments. These threats and risks expose Chinese assets and citizens to considerable danger. Therefore, security and risk management are becoming major factors that may determine the success or failure of many elements within the larger context of BRI projects.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of greater willingness by China to project force abroad, one answer to this problem is the more than five thousand PSCs that collectively employ more than three million security officers in mainland China.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these officers, however, have yet to be tested and are not currently held accountable either internationally or domestically. Of the five thousand companies, few have the capability to operate in foreign countries, and most of the time they subcontract to international or local contractors. Chinese PSCs still have a relatively small presence abroad, employing only between several hundred and several thousand unarmed security personnel, and Chinese law prohibits them from using weapons.<sup>4</sup> Past crises and the killing of Chinese personnel along the BRI corridors are forcing Beijing's strategic planners to increase the pace and the scope of civil-military integration, rethink the decades-old principle of noninterference, and most importantly develop strategies to prevent and mitigate crises along sea lines of communication and the Eurasian land belt.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, China is already increasing the pace of the PLA's modernization and the number of international missions that the PLA is conducting under the aegis of the United Nations. It has also renewed calls for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to be a security actor in Central and South Asia against the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Another priority has been the integration of the public and private sectors in promoting the growth of the military industry complex and the transfer of military equipment to neighboring countries. Although these programs have yet to deliver the desired outcomes, President Xi Jinping envisions China as a global power by 2049.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, PSCs are beginning to fill the security vacuum along the BRI routes. The current use of both international and Chinese PSCs by Chinese firms has several implications for Western interests. First, given the geographic scope and security prerequisites of BRI, the projection of Chinese power establishes a new trajectory for China's global security footprint that requires deeper understanding.<sup>7</sup> Second, this new course is something that must be engaged with and shaped by Western states.

Clear guidelines are needed to align Chinese PSCs with international standards for the Western private security sector. The inaugural International Forum on Security and Law Research

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandro Arduino, *China's Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Clover, "Chinese Private Security Companies Go Global," *Financial Times*, February 26, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/2a1ce1c8-fa7c-11e6-9516-2d969e0d3b65>.

<sup>3</sup> "Zhongguo qiye haiwai anquan guanli baogao" [Overseas Security Management of Chinese Enterprises Report], Phoenix International Think Tank, 2016, <http://pit.ifeng.com/event/special/haiwai-anquan-guanli-baogao>.

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Arduino, "China's Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road," *Diplomat*, March 20, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/chinas-private-army-protecting-the-new-silk-road>.

<sup>5</sup> Li Weihao, "Zhongguo haishang hangyun de anbao moshi jii qi falu baozhang" [The Safety of Chinese Maritime Shipping and Its Legal Guarantee], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 6 (2015); and "Shanghai Shehui Kexueyuan fabu: '2018 nian Zhongguo zhiku baogao'" [The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Publication: "2018 Chinese Think Tanks Report"], Shanghai Shehui Kexue Yuan, 2018, <https://www.sass.org.cn/2019/0319/c1198a39961/page.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "'Yidai yilu' jianshe yu goujian Zhong Mei xinxing guanxi baogao" [Report on the Construction of the "Belt and Road" and the Development of New U.S.-China Relations], Xinhua Silk Road, November 2017, <https://www.imsilkroad.com/news/p/68018.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Mingjiang Li, ed., *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 21–38.

in Beijing addressed for the first time in China the legal requirements to monitor and regulate the evolution of the Chinese private security sector. The forum involved not only academics but also international PSCs and international Chinese regulators from the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council and the Chinese military. International actors such as the Swiss government, the International Code of Conduct Association (ICoCA), and the International Committee of the Red Cross have already done work on this issue,<sup>8</sup> while the U.S.-led International Stability Operations Association (ISOA) is extending feelers toward its Chinese counterparts.<sup>9</sup> The Western security apparatus recognizes the responsibility of both the business and the private security provider to ensure that operations are effectively carried out, while taking into consideration the rights and the well-being of all stakeholders. In order to fulfill the promise of win-win cooperation that China touts for BRI, Chinese PSCs need to be proficient in managing and mitigating risks in complex business environments. Inexperienced PSCs that rely on untrained contractors could not only aggravate local tensions but also ignite anti-Chinese sentiments or even force the PLA to intervene to provide protection.

## The Need for Fast-Track Growth by Chinese PSCs

Chinese citizens and companies working overseas were involved in multiple security incidents in 2018. In February 2018, not long after the Chinese government warned its nationals in Pakistan about imminent attacks on Chinese targets, the general manager of COSCO Shipping Lines in Pakistan was shot dead in the port city of Karachi.<sup>10</sup> In June 2018, in a communiqué released on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Algeria following the robbing and killing of a Chinese citizen in the Dalbeda area, the Chinese ambassador advised Chinese citizens to employ bodyguards.<sup>11</sup> In August of the same year, a bus carrying Chinese miners was struck by a suicide bomber in the Baluchistan Province.<sup>12</sup> These attacks followed several high-profile murders of Chinese workers abroad, such as the beheading of two teachers in Quetta, Pakistan, by the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the killing of three officers from the China Railway Construction Corporation in Bamako, Mali, by locals. Most BRI projects are still in the planning or early development stages, but the violence against Chinese nationals abroad is surging proportionally to the growth of China's economic footprint.

The evolution of Chinese PSCs from local security enterprises operating at municipal levels in China to international companies able to maneuver abroad in high-risk areas is ongoing. Though this evolutionary process is developing at a fast pace, the Chinese market for force along BRI routes is quite different from the one that developed during the Iraq and Afghan wars.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Only one Chinese PSC is certified by the ICoCA. "Membership," ICoCA, <https://www.icoca.ch/en/membership>. See also "China," International Committee of the Red Cross, <https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/asia-pacific/china>.

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Doug Brooks, president emeritus ISOA, Washington, D.C., September 2018. No Chinese PSCs are currently listed as members of ISOA. "ISOA Membership," ISOA, <https://stability-operations.org/page/Membership>.

<sup>10</sup> Syed Raza Hassan, "Senior Chinese Shipping Executive Shot Dead in Pakistan," Reuters, February 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-china-shooting/senior-chinese-shipping-executive-shot-dead-in-pakistan-idUSKBN1FP1UK>.

<sup>11</sup> "Zhongguo zhu Aerbiliya dashi guan jiu '6·10 Zhongguo gongmin zao qiang yuhai an' dui a fang jiaoshe qingkuang" [The Chinese Embassy in Algeria Negotiations with Algerian Counterparts on the "June 10 Chinese Citizens that were Robbed and Killed" Incident], Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Democratic People's Republic of Algeria, June 12, 2018, <http://dz.china-embassy.org/chn/xw/t1568276.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Gul Yousafzai, "Five Wounded in Attack on Bus Ferrying Chinese Workers in Pakistan," Reuters, August 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-blast-china/five-wounded-in-attack-on-bus-ferrying-chinese-workers-in-pakistan-idUSKBN1KW05B>.

<sup>13</sup> Arduino, *China's Private Army*, 120.

While the new Silk Road harkens back to the narrative of ancient trade routes, BRI is not exclusively a new array of energy corridors and ICT networks that are being built and managed by SOEs. It is a complex and quickly evolving concept that incorporates a number of different projects. BRI is a game changer in many ways because of its global reach and size. Yet even as it has the potential to fill substantial parts of the gap in infrastructure financing, the initiative is also associated with considerable risk both for the recipient countries and for China itself. The promise of lucrative international contracts to address this security challenge is leading Chinese PSCs to internationalize.

Mapping the distribution of Chinese PSCs is not an easy task. In contrast with the secrecy of the public security sector, PSCs are eager to promote their activities abroad, even on social media platforms. Yet their international operations vary widely across Eurasia and the maritime Silk Road, depending on contractual requirements and local government acceptance of private security operators. Along vital sea lines of communication, companies such as Hua Xin Zhong An protect Chinese merchant vessels against pirates from the Strait of Malacca to the Somali coast. In Central Asia, Chinese PSCs must work through a liaison with the local government security forces to guard Chinese workers and avoid clashes with the local labor forces. In South Asia, the complicated security environment and the looming terrorist threats require not only cooperation with local armed forces but also more sophisticated security tools. In Southeast Asia, the need for Chinese companies to provide private security is at odds with local suspicion about China's hidden agenda. In Africa, Chinese PSC activity and capabilities vary from area to area, from mining projects led by small and medium-sized enterprises and guarded by armed militias to large SOE infrastructure projects protected by Chinese and Western contractors. Nevertheless, if not managed properly, Beijing's use of PSCs to protect its overseas interests is still a hazardous gambit.

The Chinese private security sector is less developed than its international peers. Local PSCs emerged in 1993 in response to the necessity of providing unarmed guards to protect companies' assets in mainland China, primarily against petty theft or angry throngs of workers.<sup>14</sup> The growth of the national private security sector has been limited by the lack of direct threats as well as a culture of bidding low for security services. Both factors contribute to China's lack of local skilled security operators. Today, security management along BRI routes is becoming a key factor that may determine the success or failure of many infrastructure projects. Nevertheless, the role of Chinese PSCs in supporting BRI projects is just starting to become regulated and supervised by the central government. In 2015, Xi demanded greater efforts to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals overseas, and the Chinese media has increased its coverage of PSCs operating abroad.<sup>15</sup>

Currently, PSCs present themselves as plausible alternatives to military intervention in providing daily security to Chinese nationals along BRI.<sup>16</sup> Although the PLA Navy showcased sophisticated crisis management capabilities in the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in 2011 and Yemen in 2015, the political and financial complexity of these operations means that military action is seldom viable, and only then after very limited and specific conditions are met.

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<sup>14</sup> Li Weihai, *Zhongguo baoan qiye kaizhan haiwai yewu de falu yu jianguan yanjiu* [Legal and Regulatory Research on Chinese Security Enterprises' Overseas Business] (Beijing: Law Press China, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> "Chinese President Strongly Condemns Mali Hotel Attack," Xinhua, November 21, 2015; and Wenting Xie, "Chinese Security Companies in Great Demand as Overseas Investment Surges," *Global Times*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/990161.shtml>.

<sup>16</sup> Guo Taisheng, *Baoan ye yu shehui anquan: Guoji, lilun yu shijian* [Security Industry and Social Security: International Theory and Practice] (Beijing: Law Press China, 2015).

Therefore, the employment of small-scale private forces offers a more flexible and economic approach to the problem. The ongoing debate over whether BRI is part of a coordinated Chinese grand strategy still casts doubt on the real role of Chinese PSCs. A common shared perception among international observers is that they are an extension of the PLA and not independent for-profit private entities. The message from Beijing is that Chinese PSCs are neither an extension of the PLA that can be called on as and when required nor an armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>17</sup>

The 2009 Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guarding Services, ratified on January 2010, updated the obsolete 1993 guidelines for the mainland PSC market.<sup>18</sup> The new law still lacks a detailed set of procedures for the provision of outbound security services as well as a clear chain of command and accountability. Another constraint is that the law is intertwined with an even older regulation promulgated in 2002, the Regulations on Administration of Use of Guns by Full-Time Guards and Escorts.<sup>19</sup> Both laws have an internal focus, expressed by the fact that the Public Security Department of the State Council is the sole entity responsible for supervising and administering security and guard services throughout the country. As soon as Chinese PSCs start to operate abroad, the State Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chinese Supreme Court, State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission, National Development and Reform Commission, and even the PLA will all claim to have supervisory authority. The new regulations, nevertheless, facilitate the registration process for local PSCs. Stimulated by BRI's demand for security, the perception of easy profits among the local security providers has skyrocketed. Regrettably, the typology of personnel and *modus operandi* have not changed substantially from the 1990s. One of the main characteristics that almost all Chinese PSCs share is former links with the police and military.<sup>20</sup> Most of their CEOs previously worked in the state security apparatus. A common problem among new Chinese PSCs is that their employees come equipped with habits—learned during years of service in the PLA or at large SOEs—that do not fit the private sector, such as a lack of personal initiative and unwavering faith in the leader.<sup>21</sup>

The results of the first national assessment conducted by Tsinghua University and the Phoenix International Think Tank on the overseas private market for security are in line with the common critiques expressed by international operators that Chinese PSCs overstate their own capabilities; are convinced that the Chinese government will provide support in a crisis; lack linguistic, intelligence-gathering, and analytic competencies; lack international experience and have not been exposed to international security problems; give unreasonably low price estimates during the bidding process; underestimate difficulties; and have operators that suffer from a lack of initiative.<sup>22</sup>

Among the problems that Chinese PSCs are facing, the recruitment and retention of qualified security managers, and not just guards, is one of the most compelling. Low salaries, difficult working conditions, and competition in mainland China to hire skilled personnel are

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<sup>17</sup> Arduino, "China's Private Army."

<sup>18</sup> For an English translation of the new regulation, see "Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guarding Services," Chinalawinfo, 2012, <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=7779>.

<sup>19</sup> "Regulations on Administration of Use of Guns by Full-Time Guards and Escorts," State Council Information Office (PRC), July 27, 2002, [http://www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-07/25/content\\_16924.htm](http://www.gov.cn/english/laws/2005-07/25/content_16924.htm).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Leon Yung, a Singaporean contractor specializing in the security of Chinese SOEs in Afghanistan and Iraq, Shanghai, August 2018.

<sup>22</sup> "Zhongguo qiye haiwai anquan guanli baogao."

a well-known hindrance for the evolution of the private security sector. Several top PSCs are scrambling to find a solution to these problems, as is discussed in the next section.

## The Development of the Chinese PSC Industry

### *Chinese PSC 2.0*

The transition of the Chinese PSC industry into a more professional sector is now not only in the hands of the central government's regulators but also in the hands of the insurance sector. The mainland private security market is currently evolving from an informal and fragmented sector to a more mature one. Both state and private corporations are beginning to realize that by contracting a professional security company they will save more money than they spend on security services.<sup>23</sup>

Since 2017, Chinese state insurance companies have become increasingly interested in engaging PSCs. From training and cooperation with international security experts (e.g., Ping An Insurance's partnership with Control Risks and Hiscox or AIG with GardaWorld Security Services) to the acquisition of shares in the main Chinese PSCs (e.g., Ping An in China Cityguard Security Service), insurance companies are actively promoting the sector's professionalization. The main constraints on the security sector's development are its late start, overly ambitious plan for development, challenges along the BRI routes, and lack of relevant overseas business experience.

The lack of overseas business experience is largely responsible for the inability to conduct adequate threat assessments and cope with foreign social, political, and regulatory environments. Chinese PSCs operating abroad tend to lack both the personal and professional connections required to network with local governments. This is one reason that they have an exaggerated expectation of consular protection as well as an unrealistic perception that Beijing's government-to-government agreements will shield them from any trouble. Adding all the above-mentioned problems to the average PSC's limited collection and analysis of local intelligence, supply-chain management, and access to logistical and legal support is a recipe for future disasters. As a result of these limitations, Chinese PSCs are often confined within the walls of gated compounds and forced to depend on external armed protection from local militias or international contractors.

In a few years, however, this situation will be radically different. Beijing is already well aware of how the number of Chinese victims in the BRI countries and the costly delays in the implementation of infrastructure projects could cause serious damage to the vision of the initiative as a tool for common prosperity and harmonious development. The presence of more professional Chinese PSCs not only will influence the outcome of BRI projects but also might affect regional geopolitical dynamics. By mitigating international security threats via the private sector, China can contribute to its win-win narrative while simultaneously avoiding suspicion about the presence of the PLA abroad. In addition, more efficient PSCs could eventually gather local intelligence that can be analyzed in China under a wider geopolitical lens.

As reflected in the growth of the PSC sector, the global reach of BRI is forcing China to become a more proactive security actor. To fill this new strategic space abroad, it has significantly increased the size of the PLA Marine Corps and has called for the professionalization of

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<sup>23</sup> Arduino, *China's Private Army*.



the military.<sup>24</sup> The strategic elements related to PSCs thus surpass basic economic calculations. China's economic diplomacy has already showcased how BRI projects can be used politically as leverage, aligning foreign countries with Beijing's interests. In the near future, the presence of efficient and competitive Chinese PSCs in the international arena could increase the range of Beijing's options for responding to human security emergencies.

Unfortunately, China's use of PSCs as a convenient place to park the army's demobilized personnel will not increase the sector's overall professionalization. In most countries, it is quite difficult for veterans to transition from military to civilian life. China currently has 57 million veterans, and this number will increase significantly in the near term.<sup>25</sup> The government has already announced several cuts in the size of the armed forces, including a reduction of more than 300,000 uniformed personnel. According to Zhou Zhanggui, these soldiers come from very different divisions and training backgrounds, and personnel from the People's Armed Police, as a paramilitary force primarily responsible for internal security, are usually better suited for the functions performed by PSCs.<sup>26</sup> Leon Yung observes that PLA veterans are able to use and maintain firearms but struggle to write even a simple security report.<sup>27</sup> Efforts to encourage personal initiative and create professional security operators will not succeed until the Chinese corporate culture that emphasizes saving face and respecting all decisions from the top (without any critical assessment) changes. Along BRI routes, China does not need more guards but efficient and flexible security managers. From the perspective of Chinese PSCs, it is also important to have proper training on the appropriate use of force. In this respect, the attitude of blind obedience exhibited by many former PLA soldiers who are now employed by Chinese PSCs is more a hindrance than an asset.

Language and culture are other obstacles that need to be overcome. The employment of Singaporean contractors whose personnel generally have a good command of Mandarin Chinese and a strong military background is not a viable solution, due to the high costs and the lack of a large contractor pool. As a result, some Chinese PSCs already have given up on teaching basic English to their operators and plan to lower costs by teaching Nepalese Gurkhas to speak basic Chinese.<sup>28</sup> The pool of talented Chinese operators will not grow until salaries in China's risk-management sector are comparable to Western levels.

In the years to come, the professionalization of the overall Chinese PSC sector will likely occur amid the reduction of actors due to mergers and acquisitions and the implementation of stringent regulations and more effective supervisory mechanisms by Beijing. The passive attitude of PSC personnel is also likely to persist, as altering the reactive posture that permeates the Chinese public and private sectors will require decades.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Minnie Chan, "As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Per Cent Increase to Marine Corps Numbers, Sources Say," *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2078245/overseas-ambitions-expand-china-plans-400pc-increase>; and "Xi Jinping: Nuli jianshe yi zhi qiangda de xiandaihua haijun wei shixian Zhongguo meng qiang jun meng tigong jianqiang liliang zhicheng" [Xi Jinping: Striving to Build a Strong Modern Navy to Provide Strong Support for the Realization of the China Dream of a Strong Military], State Council Information Office (PRC), May 24, 2017, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-05/24/content\\_5196520.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-05/24/content_5196520.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Lei Zhao, "Veteran Affairs Ministry Planned," *China Daily*, March 14, 2017, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201803/14/WS5aa85c42a3106e7dcc1416df.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with Zhou Zhanggui, the director of the Institute for Overseas Safety and Security, Zhejiang University, Shanghai, September 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Leon Yung, Shanghai, August 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with China Cityguard president Shaun Xiao, Shanghai, July 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Ghiasy and Jiayi Zhou, "The Silk Road Economic Belt: Considering Security Implications and EU-China Cooperation Prospects," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2017, 12.

One important factor in the evolution of Chinese PSCs from local to international actors is the role of well-established national companies that are slowly but professionally trying to establish an international footprint by developing local talent and coordinating their actions with the insurance sector and the Chinese central government. An example is China Cityguard Security Service. Founded in 2005 and employing over fifteen thousand people, Cityguard provides security services both domestically and abroad. Its international expansion, which began by providing services to BRI projects, now includes seventeen subsidiaries and nine partnerships with international security companies. The company's president stated that at least 30% of the total guard force currently comes from the PLA, while 50% are former police officers.<sup>30</sup> Since the launch of BRI, Cityguard has been awarded thirteen contracts to protect infrastructure projects abroad, including in high-risk areas in Pakistan.

Cityguard managers share the view that overseas investment and infrastructure programs must allocate more funds to safeguard these projects.<sup>31</sup> They also believe that security must be addressed at the earliest stage and in every aspect of the initial planning. This will allow the private security sector to provide adequate, comprehensive security upon the launch of a project instead of waiting until a major crisis or disaster leaves stakeholders with no other option. Despite the company's initial success abroad, these managers complain about a range of common problems that plague the Chinese security sector, including high turnover of staff and the unattractiveness of PSC jobs due to low wages. An important part of Cityguard's business model abroad is related to its cooperation with the Chinese company Ping An, which insures travel and other activities.

According to Cityguard's management, the overall PSC sector is expected to increase exponentially. Moreover, the expansion of Chinese PSCs abroad has also opened up new markets for the sale of security technology, such as closed-circuit television and other surveillance technology that these companies currently use in mainland China.

### *Black Swan or Blackwater: Leaning toward the U.S. Model?*

The preceding section considered how, due to the absence of precedents and broader experience, Chinese firms are creating an entire industry from scratch, while Chinese leaders are using whatever models are available to develop methods of governance and management. An example of this trend is the role of Frontier Services Group, a Hong Kong-based security, logistics, and insurance company led Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater (now Academi). The case of Frontier Services Group is unique as it attracts media attention due to the interaction of Prince with the Trump administration and the Chinese state investment group CITIC, the main company shareholder.<sup>32</sup> The company provides training at Beijing's International Security Defense College using the expertise that Prince developed during his management of Blackwater's training camp in Moyock, North Carolina, and as a leading contractor for both the U.S. State Department and Department of Defense in Iraq and Afghanistan. The college's International Security Specialist Program aims to prepare Chinese contractors for the challenges of managing security programs

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<sup>30</sup> Author's interview with Shaun Xiao, Shanghai, July 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with China Cityguard managers, Shanghai, July 2018.

<sup>32</sup> For background on Prince's interactions with the Trump administration and the Chinese state investment group CITIC, an important shareholder in the Frontier Services Group, see Marc Fisher, Ian Shapira, and Emily Rauhala, "Behind Erik Prince's China Venture," *Washington Post*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/05/04/feature/a-warrior-goes-to-china-did-erik-prince-cross-a-line>.

across BRI countries.<sup>33</sup> This program draws on Prince's new project to privatize the conflict in Afghanistan on behalf of the U.S. government. His claim is that a private force will reduce spending and increase efficiency compared with what the U.S. Army has accomplished over nearly two decades of conflict.<sup>34</sup>

Yet although this "Blackwater model" for security privatization may initially be adopted by Beijing, the long-term goal is to strengthen the links between Chinese PSCs and the public sector. One important concern, however, is that powerful Chinese PSCs may not be accountable to national security strategy but instead follow their own agendas. Beijing is well aware that the professionalization of the private security sector is a threat as well as an opportunity. It is evident that the Blackwater model is not fully applicable to China's privatization of the monopoly of force. Loosening central government control over Chinese nationals acting in a security role overseas could increase the risk of inadvertent incidents abroad causing backlash against Beijing's win-win narrative. Moreover, in the not-too-distant future, more professional and well-funded Chinese PSCs could influence national policies in order to gain lucrative contracts abroad. This scenario would involve the Chinese PSC sector's quick professionalization. As an example, China's expansion to Africa under BRI with the promise of \$60 billion in investment in 2019 requires PSCs that not only are able to provide guards but are competent in vetting local security partners.<sup>35</sup> This process is already happening, and the basic functions that PSCs are now providing are evolving toward more sophisticated services, ranging from the abovementioned security screening for local contractors, risk analysis, and risk-mitigation reports to more sophisticated training for SOE managers traveling abroad. At the same time, this new breed of Chinese PSCs needs to avoid inciting or alienating local populations through corruption and abuse.

According to Jamie Williamson, the rise of private security actors will increase their role in China's national security strategy.<sup>36</sup> In this context, Chinese PSCs need to take into consideration the increasingly complex environment in postwar or otherwise very unstable locations. Several of these companies have set ambitious objectives for foreign projects, but they need to be trained beforehand to identify common pitfalls that their peers have already experienced. As an example, some countries on BRI routes do not allow foreign armed contractors or require that a high percentage of local security officials be used. Chinese PSCs thus need to set up a screening system to analyze, inspect, and assess local security companies and individuals that could be trusted and hired.

## Conclusion

In order to fulfill the promises of win-win cooperation that China touts with BRI, Chinese PSCs operating along the new Silk Road need to be proficient in managing and mitigating risks in complicated business environments. If managed correctly, the interaction in the BRI footprint between global projects and local security dynamics could promote sustainable development.

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<sup>33</sup> Frontier Services Group, "Training Overview," <http://www.fsgroup.com/en/save1.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Tara Copp, "Here's the Blueprint for Erik Prince's \$5 Billion Plan to Privatize the Afghanistan War," *Military Times*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/09/05/heres-the-blueprint-for-erik-princes-5-billion-plan-to-privatize-the-afghanistan-war>.

<sup>35</sup> "China's Xi Pledges \$60 Billion in Financing for Africa," Associated Press, September 3, 2018, <https://apnews.com/1fc21c4b22144b26bf1253d8f5c623c1>.

<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Jamie Williamson, Executive Director of ICoCA, Shanghai and Geneva, September 2018.

Conversely, lack of transparency and accountability, in particular in the sensitive area of security, could exacerbate geopolitical tensions and intensify local weaknesses. While the public-private partnership platform can provide a template to share financial risks and strengthen norms and regulations, the need for stability and security against political risk and criminal violence is an opportunity for China to engage with international stakeholders.

Predicting the future of the Chinese PSCs at this early stage of development is a challenging task due to the lack of a historical data set that can be used as a proxy to develop and test a sound theory. Reliance on Western examples derived from Africa's postcolonial wars or the more recent employment of PSCs during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan could lead to cross-cultural mistakes and assumptions that do not fit China's current risk perceptions.

Nevertheless, one forecast could be based on the pattern of industrial development that enabled China to become the world's second-largest economy in just three decades. Using the Chinese steel sector as an example, it is possible to trace a line that begins with the disastrous autarchic experiments in steel production during the Cultural Revolution and extends to China's opening up to Western influence in the late 1970s. Joint ventures with foreign industrial counterparts enabled the local actors to gain advanced technologies, expertise, training, and an international logistics network as well as develop rules and regulations. In the 1980s the explosion of internal market demands led to an exponential growth of small and medium-sized steel enterprises plagued by inefficiency that had to be sustained by the state. In the late 1990s the central government started a policy of rationalization of the national steel sector. A handful of leading SOEs—the so-called national champions—absorbed the best small and medium-sized mills and closed the inefficient ones. The modernization of the steel industry enabled China to produce high-tech materials, develop an international logistics and trade network, and increase the mergers and acquisitions of niche international high-tech companies. Nowadays two Chinese SOEs, Baowu Group and Shagang Group, are the second- and sixth-largest steel companies in the world, respectively.<sup>37</sup>

This pattern has been followed by Chinese SOEs in many different industrial and service sectors with outstanding outcomes. Leapfrogging in the security sector is more difficult than in other sectors such as ICT due to the fact that personal experience, training, and proven engagement are necessary steps to foster a healthy sector. Nevertheless, it is possible to forecast the development of a few security national champions that could absorb the current small and medium-sized PSCs. These large companies will have closer cooperation with the central government and SOEs and deeper coordination with the army and relevant stakeholders.

Several questions remain unanswered, but it is still critical to focus attention on the evolution of civil-military integration with “Chinese characteristics” as well as the new guidelines that central government bodies such as the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration and the National Development and Reform Commission are developing to promote the safety of Chinese personnel operating abroad. Another question to keep in mind is related to the influence of non-Western private security models. Chinese PSCs operating in postconflict reconstruction areas, such as in Syria, could be influenced by Russian private contractors that are already operating there.

The gap between today's unregulated expansion overseas and the future national champions will be filled by Chinese PSCs that are able to learn, adapt, and acquire competent foreign PSCs in

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<sup>37</sup> World Steel Association, “Top Steel-Producing Companies 2018,” May/June 2019, <https://www.worldsteel.org/steel-by-topic/statistics/top-producers.html>.

their operational areas. In terms of future competition with Western counterparts, it is important to remember that Chinese PSCs operating abroad provide services exclusively to Chinese clients. At present, they have no interest in finding a market external to the one offered by Chinese public and private companies. However, the prospect of a mature Chinese PSC competing on international tenders against U.S. and other Western companies cannot be totally disregarded.

A new breed of Chinese PSCs will be at the forefront of nonmilitary solutions, and their growth will sustain the expansion of SOEs along the BRI corridors. These PSCs will also support the PLA's security calculations in terms of data gathering, early warning, and overseas security policy integration. This is the right time for the West to engage Chinese regulators and the leading Chinese PSCs to provide the legislative guidelines, training, and best practices necessary to avoid repeating costly mistakes. The professionalization of Chinese PSCs and their support of both BRI and the internationalization of the PLA are already on the way. Failing to engage the Chinese private security sector now will leave an open entry point to other foreign security actors. Future mistakes committed by untrained Chinese PSCs will have ripple effects from Eurasia to Africa for not only BRI but also Western interests.







*Seattle and Washington, D.C.*

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300  
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98105 USA  
PHONE 206-632-7370, FAX 206-632-7487

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 USA  
PHONE 202-347-9767, FAX 202-347-9766

[NBR@NBR.ORG](mailto:NBR@NBR.ORG), [WWW.NBR.ORG](http://WWW.NBR.ORG)