CHAPTER 3

U.S.-CHINA SECURITY, POLITICS, AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SECTION 1: YEAR IN REVIEW: SECURITY, POLITICS, AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Key Findings

- In 2021, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) marked the centennial of its founding by instructing Party members and the Chinese people to prepare for a decades-long confrontation with the United States and other democracies over the future of the global order. Chinese leaders grew more uncompromising in pursuing their interests as they insisted historical trends proved the inferiority of democracy to the political, economic, and normative model of their one-party rule.

- In an apparent paradox, the CCP assessed that internal and external threats facing the regime were intensifying and that its rule was becoming less secure despite the growth of Chinese power. CCP leaders vowed forceful measures against officials and Party members wavering in the face of international pressure and continued their repressive campaigns in Hong Kong and against the Uyghur people, Tibetans, and other ethnic minority groups.

- Beijing reaffirmed its intent to maintain high levels of defense spending to transform the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) into a powerful force able to operate in and beyond the Indo-Pacific region. Chinese leaders showed new levels of frustration with the PLA’s lagging efforts to improve its training and personnel quality amid perennial concerns about the force’s lack of warfighting experience. The PLA continued to commission advanced warships and field new aircraft capable of projecting force beyond China’s borders. Beijing also signaled its interest in establishing additional overseas military bases, reportedly including locations on Africa’s west coast.

- China’s diplomats deepened their embrace of a belligerent and uncompromising approach to foreign relations. The foreign ministry’s disregard for the reputational cost of its strident rhetoric reflected domestic incentives that reward efforts to raise China’s global standing while discrediting the United States and other democracies. As it grew more confrontational toward democratic countries, Beijing expanded its partnerships with Russia.
and Iran and attempted to cast itself as a leader of developing countries across Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.

- China’s aggressive tone and military coercion of its neighbors prompted deepening cooperation between Indo-Pacific countries and new efforts by the EU and others to increase their diplomatic and military presence in the region. China continued its military tensions with India, building illegal military outposts in neighboring Bhutan and launching cyberattacks that may have caused blackouts across India.

- U.S. concerns over the growing national security threat from China continue. Beijing’s refusal to cooperate in investigating the origins of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and demands that the Biden Administration cease all criticism of China’s human rights abuses and abandon other policies opposed by the CCP undermined Beijing’s initial hopes for a reset in bilateral ties.

**Introduction**

In 2021, the CCP celebrated the centennial of its founding. Amid the triumphant celebrations, however, the message of senior CCP leaders was sober. Rather than evoke satisfaction that China’s economic development had ushered in a new era of peace and prosperity, CCP leaders instructed Party members and the Chinese people to prepare for a decades-long confrontation with the United States and other democracies over the future of the global order. Meanwhile, China’s leaders made plain their ambition to present their one-party rule to the world as a superior political, economic, and moral model to democracy and capitalism.

Behind their global assertiveness, CCP leaders perceived growing internal and external threats to the survival of their regime. As the United States and other democracies took steps to defend themselves against China’s influence activities, military power, and coercive economic practices, the CCP escalated attacks against the “enemy forces” at home and abroad that it described as attempting to undermine its rule. Today, the regime is both confident and paranoid, insistent on its superiority but increasingly fearful of subversion and failure. Having declared the superiority and inevitable triumph of their model, CCP leaders have proved unwilling to tolerate any domestic or foreign criticism of their actions.

Over the past year, the CCP regime rejected compromise and responded aggressively to any criticism or challenge to its interests. China stepped up its use of military coercion in the East and South China Seas, the Taiwan Strait, and along the Indian border, while attempting to coerce Australia into revising internal policies displeasing to Beijing, such as calling for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19. China also extended its use of coercion beyond the Indo-Pacific region, demanding Guyana cancel plans for a new Taiwan trade office and halting rail shipments to Lithuania after the country decided to open a similar representative office. At the same time, Beijing attempted to cast itself as a leader of countries across the developing world, such as by trumpeting an agreement with Arab states to form a “Chinese-Arab community of common destiny.” Despite the steady coalescing of many democra-
cies within and outside the Indo-Pacific against its coercive behavior, Beijing projected confidence in its ability to expand partnerships with other countries and overcome all opposition to achieve its goals.

This section examines the key developments in China’s politics, military posture, and foreign relations in 2021. It begins by examining CCP leaders’ view of their position within the international system and concerns over intensifying threats to their rule. The section then assesses the Party’s increasing domestic repression, the growth and continued shortfalls of the PLA, and the mixed results of Chinese foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific and globally. It concludes by examining the evolution of U.S.-China relations through the transition to and early days of the Biden Administration. This section is based on Commission hearings and briefings, discussions with outside experts, and open source research and analysis throughout the year.

**Remaking the International Order**

In its centennial year, the CCP forcefully asserted its ambition to replace the processes and norms of the liberal international order with those of its own making. In a speech in Tiananmen Square marking the Party’s centennial celebration in July, General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping quoted Mao Zedong in reminding his audience of the CCP’s original aim to fundamentally alter the post-World War II international order. “Through tenacious struggle,” he recited, “the Party and the Chinese people showed the world that the Chinese people were capable of not only destroying the old world, but also building a new one.” He further argued that by using Marxism the CCP had “seized the initiative in history.” Using these principles, General Secretary Xi declared, the Party had not only developed China’s own economy and material power but had also “created a new model for human advancement.”

General Secretary Xi’s characterization of the global relevance of China’s model followed similar arguments by CCP officials earlier in the year. Seizing upon the contested U.S. presidential election and the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol, CCP leaders claimed that a clear contrast had emerged between the “order of China” and the “chaos of the West.” In another assessment of China’s growing strength relative to the United States and other democracies, CCP leaders claimed that historical trends indicated the “East is rising and the West is in decline.”

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ananmen Square, General Secretary Xi broadcast the CCP's unwillingness to alter its governance practices or foreign policy in the face of outside pressure, declaring that the Party would not “accept sanctimonious preaching from those who feel they have the right to lecture us.” Instead, he warned, anyone attempting to “bully” China would “crack their heads and spill blood on a Great Wall of steel fortified by the flesh and blood of 1.4 billion Chinese people.”

The CCP regime further judged it faced a unique opportunity to establish its governance model as a leading political force internationally. Central to this calculation was the Party’s judgment that the international order was entering a period of “turmoil and transformation” while experiencing “great changes not seen in a century.” Chinese leaders assessed the COVID-19 pandemic had quickened the pace of these changes and helped push the world to a “historical dividing line.” At this point, the CCP judged, great power relations were experiencing a “new round of adjustment” while the global order split up and formed new groupings. In an article published in November 2020, China’s top diplomat and Politburo member* Yang Jiechi asserted that China must lead the world’s transformation and establish a Sinocentric “community of common human destiny.” In January 2021, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi added in the Party’s theoretic journal *Qiushi (Seeking Truth)* that General Secretary Xi had identified the “correct direction” for the global order’s transformation. In the coming years, Party leaders argued, the CCP would therefore place an even greater emphasis on contributing a “China approach” to global governance.

“China Cannot Compromise”

Underlying the CCP’s aspiration to global leadership is its unfounded claim to speak for the international community and represent new norms of justice superseding those of the international order prior to China’s rise. In a year when the United States and other countries condemned the CCP’s genocide against the Uyghur people, the dismantling of Hong Kong’s democracy and civil liberties, and other human rights abuses, Chinese leaders were unmoved. In his January 2021 article, Foreign Minister Wang claimed that China “stood on the side of international morality and justice” in its foreign relations and would “speak with the force of justice” against criticism of the CCP’s handling of the COVID-19 outbreak; its governance system; and its actions toward Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. In an interview in April, the foreign minister revealed the linkage between the CCP’s increasingly harsh tone toward the United States and other countries and its moral self-justification. Referring to U.S. officials’ remarks on the need for a mixture of cooperation and confrontation with China, Foreign Minister Wang responded simply, “China cannot compromise because what we ad-
here to is the basic norms of international relations. China cannot yield because there are numerous developing as well as medium and small countries behind us.”17 For these reasons, he declared, China “certainly has the right to strike back because we must safeguard our country’s sovereignty and national dignity.”18

China depicted the United States and other developed democracies as outdated global rules-setters that the rest of the world should cast aside in favor of Beijing’s own definition of international norms. When leaders of Group of Seven countries gathering in the United Kingdom (UK) in June 2021 criticized China’s human rights abuses and market-distorting economic practices, Chinese officials questioned the authority of attendees at the summit, which also included Australia, India, and South Korea, to make these assertions. “The days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone,” the spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in the UK declared. “There is only one set of rules for the world, that is, the basic norms of international relations… not the so-called rules formulated by a small number of countries.”19 The spokesperson accused the summit’s communique of “wanton[ly] smearing… China” and “flagrantly violat[ing] the basic norms of international relations.”20 A People’s Daily editorial published after the summit made a similar attempt to cast China as the true arbiter of global order. “The unilateral retrogressive acts of the United States and a few other countries will only undermine international rules and order,” it claimed. “Lies are lies, and the nature of a lie will not change because of a few vilifying remarks from rumormongers.”21

Fears of Growing Threats to the Regime

Despite their projection of self-assurance, Chinese leaders assessed that threats to their regime were growing and exacerbating challenges inside China. Moreover, the CCP judged that further growth of Chinese power would make the Party’s leadership more, rather than less, insecure. In October 2020, People’s Daily published a study guide expressing this pessimistic view following the release of the third volume of General Secretary Xi’s collection of speeches, The Governance of China. “It is impossible for the road ahead to be smooth sailing,” the study guide warned. “The greater our accomplishments, the more we must act with extreme caution… and forcefully respond to major risks and challenges.”22 The guide continued, “We must concentrate on the most harmful aspects of all developments,” recognizing that if the Party failed to respond forcefully, “small risks and threats will become large ones and partial risks and threats will become systemic ones.”23 Left unaddressed, external threats would eventually become domestic threats while challenges to China’s “economy, culture, society, technology, and internet… would transform into political risks and challenges threatening the Party’s ruling position.”24 The threats facing the CCP were long-term and would only grow more complex, the guide concluded, to the point of the Party encountering “unimaginably stormy seas.”25

Chinese leaders viewed U.S. policies pushing back against the CCP’s growing assertiveness as central to the regime’s challenges. In January 2021, Secretary-General of the CCP’s Central Political
and Legal Affairs Commission. Chen Yixin declared “containment and suppression” by the United States to be a major threat to the CCP. Referring to Mao’s strategy for fighting Japan during World War II, Secretary-General Chen assessed the confrontation between the United States and China to have characteristics of a “protracted war.”† In remarks on the sidelines of China’s National People’s Congress in March, State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe described the long-term relationship between the United States and China as one of “containment versus counter-containment” and predicted U.S. containment efforts would last for decades. He repeated his assertion from the 2020 National People’s Congress that China had entered a phase of high risk for national security and urged the country to improve its military capability to prevail over “strong enemies”—a phrase CCP leaders use to refer to the United States.²⁸

The CCP judged that ideological threats to the regime were at least as severe as traditional national security challenges. In December 2020, Politburo member and head of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission Guo Shengkun claimed that both traditional and nontraditional threats were increasing and becoming more interconnected against the “great backdrop of the strategic contest between China and the United States.” If left unchecked, he warned, these threats could easily grow into “systemic risks.” CCP leaders argued that underlying these threats was the hostile intent of “outside enemy forces” advocating for principles such as democracy and the rule of law and questioning the Party’s right to rule. In its study guide on The Governance of China, the People’s Daily provided more detail on the paranoia gripping the highest ranks of the CCP. “Every kind of enemy force has never stopped their plots to ‘Westernize’ and divide China, nor have they stopped their activities to topple and destroy the Communist Party’s leader—"The Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission is an important body coordinating the CCP’s “security maintenance” work, coded language for managing social unrest to protect the regime, including through the use of force. In this capacity, it has direct oversight over China’s law and order bodies, including the Supreme People’s Court, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of State Security. The Commission’s head, titled the secretary, reports directly to General Secretary Xi through the National Security Commission, which Xi chairs. The secretary-general of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission is responsible for drafting documents representing the commission’s views and implementing its decisions. The commission’s secretary typically exercises control over organizational decisions by working closely with the secretary-general to draft policy details. Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Wang Zhou, “Integrated Fragmentation and the Role of Leading Small Groups in Chinese Politics,” China Journal 82 (July 1, 2019): 1–22, 14–15; Dali L. Yang, “China’s Troubled Quest for Order: Leadership, Organization and the Contradictions of the Stability Maintenance Regime,” Journal of Contemporary China 26:103 (January 2017) 35–53, 36, 42, 50.

†Chinese official discussions of “protracted war” refer to Mao’s famous 1938 essay “On Protracted War,” in which he advocated for a long-term strategy to prevail over Japan during World War II. Mao used the essay to urge CCP members to resist both the allure of a quick victory and of defeatism, arguing instead for a “long and ruthless war” to defeat its more powerful adversary. By being more willing to tolerate casualties, economic damage, and other costs of conflict, Mao envisioned China forcing a “strategic stalemate” from which it would gradually rise to a superior position and launch a decisive counteraffensive. He expected conditions for this victory to be set in part by the powerful adversary suffering heavy casualties, discontent among its population and troops, economic losses, and condemnation by world opinion. Chinese official statements have used the phrase more in recent years, such as in a July 2020 Politburo meeting statement that China’s economic challenges “must be understood from the perspective of protracted war.” Xinhu’a, “General Secretary Xi Jinping Presides over a Central Committee Politburo Meeting, Where It Decided to Hold the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee and Where It Analyzed and Studied the Current Economic Situation and Economic Work” (中共中央政治局召开会议，决定召开十九届五中全会，分析研究当前经济形势和经济工作 中共中央总书记习近平主持会议), July 30, 2020, Translation; Mao Zedong, “On Protracted War” (论持久战), Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung Vol. II, 1967, 113–194.
ship and China’s socialist system,” the paper warned.32 “They have plotted all along to attempt a ‘color revolution’ in China.”33

Vows of a Forceful Response

CCP leaders declared their intent to fight back forcefully against these perceived threats, focusing particular attention on combating ideological threats. In its study guide, People’s Daily called on the Party to use “offensive moves” in a “war of strategic initiative” to guard against risks and neutralize challenges.34 Identifying political security as the CCP’s foremost security concern, it urged the Party to implement its “democratic people’s dictatorship” to “severely strike enemy forces’ activities to infiltrate, destroy, topple, and split apart” the CCP.35 According to the paper, of particular concern to Party leaders were systemic risks with the potential to “delay or cut short” China’s rejuvenation.36 In his December 2020 article, Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission head Guo issued a similar instruction to strike back against enemy forces attempting to destroy the CCP and called on officials to protect the security of the Party’s ruling position and ideology.37

In a rare but clear indication that individuals or factions within the CCP still oppose the Party’s main line, CCP leaders singled out for special criticism Party members whose resolution and belief had been shaken by these perceived “hostile forces.”38 In a February 2021 speech to members of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Chen Yixin expressed General Secretary Xi’s view that in the face of mounting external pressures, “every kind of mistaken thinking would seize the opportunity to surface” within the CCP.39 In what was likely an understatement of the extent of the problem, Chen warned of the threat from a “tiny minority of Party members and officials” whose belief in the CCP’s legitimacy and mission had “faded from their memories.”40 (For more on CCP leaders’ concerns over Party members opposing or lacking commitment to the policies of the central leadership, see Chapter 1, Section 1, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Ambitions and Challenges at Its Centennial.”)

The Party’s Tightening Grip

In its campaign to eradicate perceived harmful influences, over the past year the CCP expanded efforts to control all aspects of Chinese society and culture it viewed as threatening to its rule. In April 2021, the Ministry of State Security promulgated new rules for organizations and enterprises in China responding to “intensified infiltration” by “overseas espionage and intelligence agencies and hostile forces.”41 The new rules require regular counterespionage education and training for personnel who routinely interact with foreigners, rather than only for those who work on secret matters, reflecting the CCP’s view that any interaction with foreign entities is inherently a security risk.42 The regulations detail the responsibilities of Party and state organs, social groups, enterprises, and public institutions to actively prevent espionage within their units and require state security organs to train these entities in counterespionage.43

The CCP’s efforts at control extended even to the domains of archaeology and Chinese history.44 In a speech published in November 2020 but given several months earlier at a Politburo study session,
General Secretary Xi asserted that historical and cultural “struggles... will exist for a long time” and that the Party must use archaeological studies to counter “distortions and slanders” on China’s history.45 Acting on Mao’s dictum that “the past should serve the present,” he connected the development of what is now China to the Party’s mission of “developing and upholding socialism with Chinese characteristics... in the correct historical direction.”46 By emphasizing the primacy of “telling a good story of China’s history,” General Secretary Xi promoted a view of Chinese history that distorts facts to argue for the superiority of the Party’s leadership.47

**Extending the Party’s Influence at Home and Abroad**

In January 2021, the CCP’s United Front Work Department issued updated regulations cementing General Secretary Xi’s ideology in the Party’s central bureaucracy for guiding domestic and overseas influence operations. The new regulations, updating trial regulations issued in 2015, show that United Front work has grown both broader in scope and more focused on discrete groups.48 For example, the new regulations explain in detail the importance of “guiding” overseas and returned Chinese, including overseas Chinese students and their families in China. They also define for the first time the United Front’s focus on “new social classes,” which include knowledge workers and other skilled Chinese employees of foreign-invested enterprises, social organizations, and media organizations.49

The CCP moved to further entrench its ideology in the Chinese court system and extend the international influence of its “rule by law” system where authorities use the law as a means of suppressing political opposition. In November 2020, the CCP held its first ever central-level work conference on law-based governance and established “Xi Jinping Thought on the Rule of Law” as the main guide of China’s legal system. In January 2021, the CCP Central Committee issued a plan calling for a “socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics” to take shape by 2025 and be “basically formed” by 2035, with the aim of bringing about the “convergence and coordination of internal Party regulations and national laws.”50 The goal of this legal system, according to Zhu Zheng, assistant professor at China University of Political Science and Law, is “entrenching the Party’s leadership on political power and ideology more deeply than before.”51 Other goals of the Central Committee’s plan are for China to “actively participate in the formulation of international rules,” “accelerate the construction of a legal system applicable outside China’s jurisdiction,” and promote its view internationally that the rule of law* should serve the Party’s interests.52 State media praised the “socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics” concept as a contribution to advancing the world’s understanding of the rule of law.53

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* Chinese discussion of legal systems often interchangeably uses “rule of law,” under which laws constrain political leaders, and “rule by law,” under which political leaders use the legal system to protect their own power. The two phrases sound the same in Chinese, and legal experts have argued official Chinese sources sometimes use the former translation when they mean the latter to give the impression that the meaning of “rule of law” is the same in China as it is in democratic countries. Cheng Li, “Chinese Politics, Economy, and Rule of Law,” Brookings Institution, September 20, 2016; China Focus, “Laying Down the Law: Jerome Cohen on the Rule of Law in China Pt. 2,” August 12, 2015; Josh Chin, “‘Rule of Law’ or ‘Rule by Law’? In China, a Preposition Makes All the Difference,” Wall Street Journal, October 20, 2014.
Continued Repression of Ethnic Minorities

CCP repression of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia continued to devastate communities in these frontier regions. Evidence emerged in late 2020 that the Chinese government had built factories inside Xinjiang detention camps and that for years it had forced detained Muslims to work as part of a “labor transfer program” that is tainting global supply chains with forced labor. The U.S. government responded to reports of forced labor-derived cotton, tomato, and silica products from Xinjiang by issuing six new orders in fiscal year 2021 to prohibit the import of relevant goods.* Based on reports of authorities’ forced sterilizations, coerced abortions, and other human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang, the United States in 2021 formally determined the Chinese government to be committing ongoing crimes against humanity and genocide in Xinjiang.55

The CCP continued its campaign to “sinicize” Tibetan Buddhism, tightening its political control over the religion. The Chinese government issued new rules in January 2021 requiring religious professionals to “love the motherland, support the leadership of the CCP, and support the socialist system,” forcing them to subordinate their religious views to the Party and the Chinese state.56 In June, a Tibetan monk surrounded by security cameras and government observers told a closely monitored group of foreign journalists in Tibet that his “spiritual leader” was General Secretary Xi.57 After the Chinese government implemented policies in 2020 to phase out Mongolian-language education in Inner Mongolia, Chinese officials reportedly began warning students from Inner Mongolia in Japan not to talk about the ongoing Chinese government suppression of Mongolian culture.58 In response, in April 2021 a group of Japanese legislators created a parliamentary caucus to protect Mongolian culture from assimilation.59

Toward a Global People’s Liberation Army

Over the past year, the CCP signaled its ambition to transform the PLA into a global force able to operate both within and beyond the Indo-Pacific region. In his speech celebrating the CCP’s centennial in July, General Secretary Xi described the PLA as “a powerful force for protecting peace in our region and beyond.”60 Central Military Commission Vice Chairman General Xu Qiliang similarly linked the PLA to China’s global leadership ambitions, noting in a November 2020 article the force would “contribute its strength” to building a “community of common human destiny” and carry out duties “commensurate with China’s international status.”61 In a further reflection of top leaders’ vision for the PLA’s global role, he added that the force would work to establish a “security guarantee” for China’s overseas interests.62

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* U.S. Customs and Border Protection may issue an order to withhold release of any goods from its custody that are suspected of having been produced with forced labor. In 2021, these orders also targeted widespread use of forced labor in an entire commercial fishing fleet based in eastern China. As of June 2021, according to a White House fact sheet, 35 of 49 active withhold release orders were on goods from China, and 11 were on goods originating in Xinjiang. White House, FACT SHEET: New U.S. Government Actions on Forced Labor in Xinjiang, June 24, 2021; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Forced Labor Enforcement, Withhold Release Orders, Findings, and Detention Procedures, August 2016.
The CCP continued to support its ambitious goals for force development with high levels of defense spending. In 2021, the PLA’s official budget grew by 6.8 percent, which is a slightly higher growth rate than the 6.6 percent increase it maintained in 2020 despite slowing economic growth and pandemic conditions. Meanwhile, the PLA continued producing sophisticated weapons and ships that further extend its power projection capabilities. In April 2021, the PLA Navy commissioned its first Type 075 (YUSHEN) amphibious assault ship, third Type 055 (RENHAI) destroyer, and sixth Type 094 (JIN) nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine. China’s Type 075 ships support what one analyst considers to be “an amphibious capability that is second only to the United States,” and they likely serve as the prototype for an even newer class of amphibious assault vessels capable of launching fixed-wing aircraft.

The PLA typically keeps its Type 094 submarines from public view, so their inclusion in a public commissioning ceremony with China’s newest amphibious assault ship and premier destroyer likely served propaganda purposes by stoking nationalist pride. In March, China launched three additional Yaogan-31 surveillance satellites, joining a constellation likely to provide the PLA with real-time targeting of distant maritime targets such as U.S. aircraft carriers. China further advanced its power projection capabilities by fielding the Y-20U aerial refueling tanker aircraft, while reports indicated Beijing may be exploring opportunities for stationing troops abroad. With the Y-20U entering service this year, the PLA will be more capable of extending the flight range and duration of its J-20 fighter, H-6 bomber, and KJ-500A early warning and control aircraft. Reuters reported China may also be expanding the number of facilities that PLA aircraft can use, notably with a secret agreement to upgrade an airstrip on an island in Kiribati. This agreement could position Chinese facilities astride important sea lanes and flight paths between the United States and Oceania. In May 2021, commander of U.S. Africa Command General Stephen Townsend stated in an interview that China was actively seeking to develop a naval base on Africa’s western coast and had recently approached countries from Mauritania to Namibia in hopes of securing an agreement.

He assessed that China sought to construct a port facility for rearming and repairing naval vessels, which would be capable of hosting Chinese submarines or aircraft carriers. The PLA also hardened and extended the range of its border defenses this year. In May, the PLA Army tested new long-range rockets able to strike targets 100 miles (160 kilometers) away, which is a sufficient distance to hit targets in Taiwan from firing positions in the Chinese mainland. Along the China-India border, the PLA Army established a joint air defense system that uses advanced PLA Army anti-aircraft systems to enhance the early warning and rapid deployment capabilities of the PLA Air Force.

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* China’s government does not report all defense spending in its official budget. Its official figures are inconsistent and cannot be verified. Jane’s experts assessed that in 2021, China’s defense spending was 25 percent higher than officially reported. Jon Grevatt and Andrew MacDonald, “China Announces 6.8% Increase in 2021 Defence Budget,” Jane’s Defense Weekly, March 5, 2021.

† The RENHAI-class destroyer has tonnage and capabilities that exceed those of ships that were previously designated as cruisers. For a discussion on the distinction between destroyers and cruisers, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020 Annual Report to Congress, December 1, 2020, 342.
Continued Frustration over Shortfalls in Personnel Quality and Leadership

Despite the PLA’s success in fielding advanced weapons systems, China’s civilian and military leaders showed signs of impatience with the PLA’s meager gains in its longstanding efforts to overcome weaknesses in training and personnel quality. China’s leaders have long criticized the PLA as suffering from a “peace disease,” which is a term highlighting the concerns of civilian and military leaders over the PLA’s lack of combat experience and preparedness for war.75 In 2021, General Secretary Xi escalated this criticism by taking the unusual step of convening a conference on improving combat-realistic military exercises and by modifying his annual training mobilization order to express the need for the PLA to “build a new military training system.”76 General Xu also reflected dissatisfaction with the PLA’s competence in his November 2020 article, urging the force to continue elevating personnel quality.77 He further instructed the PLA to enhance its focus on warfighting, warning that “forgetting how to fight spells danger and neglecting to prepare for battles to come guarantees defeat.”78

The PLA refocused efforts to remediate its lack of wartime experience by practicing unit-level decision-making. PLA exercises in 2021 placed a greater focus on giving units the autonomy to make decisions in the field.79 The PLA Air Force improved officer autonomy this year by significantly increasing “unrestrained air combat training,” an approach in which pilots are permitted to make their own decisions in combat.80 PLA Navy pilots from the Northern, Eastern, and Southern Theater Commands held a major cross-regional exercise this year also focused on unrestrained air combat training.81 Despite these efforts, state media reported that PLA units continued to struggle with autonomous decision-making, such as deputy commanders for some units being unprepared to take over command when exercises simulated injuries to their senior officers.82

Political Work May Conceal Insecurities about Loyalty

The PLA continued to ramp up its emphasis on political work, potentially revealing insecurities about troop loyalty. In one example, the 2020 edition of the Science of Military Strategy, an authoritative textbook for PLA officers published by the PLA’s National Defense University, included a new chapter on wartime political work that anticipates modern warfare will include a “hidden front” that involves “inciting defections.”83 In his November 2020 article, General Xu indirectly expressed concern over political reliability in the ranks, demanding that soldiers be “absolutely loyal, clean, and reliable” and allow “absolutely no wavering or deviation… on the fundamental issue” of Party loyalty.84 In December 2020, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of National Defense announced that PLA servicemembers would receive further political training through a dedicated app called “Study the Strong Military.”85 State media described some challenges facing the PLA’s political education efforts. For instance, some brigade leaders reported concerns that their younger enlisted members were “ideologically active with distinct personalities,” euphemistically describing individualism resistant to indoctrination.86
Conscription in the PLA

Chinese citizens may volunteer for military service or be invol-
untarily conscripted for two years, after which they may choose to
continue service or be demobilized. China does not publish data
on how many of its recruits are conscripts rather than volunteers,
and PLA recruitment practices may further blur the lines be-
tween voluntary and forced recruitment. Since 2009, the PLA has
sought to conscript or recruit at least 100,000 college-educated
enlistees each year. The PLA appears to struggle to meet this
goal, however, having repeatedly lowered its physical standards
for conscription to recruit college-educated enlistees. Moreover,
college-educated recruits may not be of the quality the PLA needs
to modernize its force. For example, one 2017 report found PLA
college-educated recruits included “basically no graduates” of
China’s top 100 civilian educational institutions. Some PLA re-
search also reveals concerns that college-educated conscripts are
not inclined to continue their military service after their initial
two-year term.

New Leaps for China’s Space Program

China’s dual-use space and rocketry programs met important
milestones in 2021, including successfully landing a probe on Mars
and launching the first module of its long-term space station. The
successful landing and deployment in May of the Zhurong Mars
rover for a 93-day mission was notable both for being China’s first
time landing a probe on another planet and for being the first time
any space agency had succeeded on its first try at the notoriously
difficult Mars landing, nicknamed the “seven minutes of terror.”
The Chinese government also added sophisticated new ground in-
frastucture to support space exploration missions. The Tianwen-1
orbiter, which carries additional instruments to study Mars’s surface
and atmosphere, will relay data through a new, specially construct-
ed 70-meter steerable radio telescope, which is the largest in Asia.

China launched the Tianhe core module of its long-term low-
Earth orbit space station in April 2021, celebrating the project as
the culmination of a 30-year plan to master human spaceflight and
test technologies for long-term space habitation. The first team of
three taikonauts launched in June to carry out a three-month tour,
which is China’s longest crewed space mission ever. The launch
was the third of a total of 11 required to complete the station’s con-
struction between 2021 and 2022. China intends to use the station
to further international scientific coordination, including joint mis-
sions between taikonauts and foreign astronauts, according to the
military agency overseeing China’s human spaceflight program.

The Chinese government’s apparent indifference to the interna-
tional downrange risk from its rockets marred the diplomatic vic-
tory of lofting its first space station module. Debris from launches
in China’s interior has long threatened areas within China, but the
new Long March-5B (LM-5B) rocket, which was used to launch the

*The United States and Russia lofted their first modules for the International Space Station
in 1998. ISS National Laboratory, “History and Timeline of the ISS.”
Tianhe module in April, now spreads this risk to the international community. Its design eschews boosters designed to provide maneuverability after launching its payload, causing the entire rocket to achieve orbit and then fall back to earth unpredictably.* According to Harvard astronomer Jonathan McDowell, in designing the LM-5B this way the Chinese government is “deliberately just not caring and leaving it to reenter.” Plans to launch two additional space station modules on LM-5Bs in 2022 will risk the safety of people in downrange countries each time.

Leading experts and official policy continued to signal that the space sector would remain an important focus in China’s national ambitions. The 14th Five Year Plan (2021–2025), approved in March 2021, stressed the importance of breakthroughs in seven science and technology frontier sectors, including deep space. That month, Liu Zhiring, National People’s Congress delegate and Party Secretary of the China Academy of Aerospace Propulsion Technology, said China’s rocketry program would strive to reach “world-class” level during the next five years. Jiang Jie, an expert at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, said that during this period China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation would work on a new heavy-lift rocket and another new rocket for crewed launches. Former Chinese National Space Administration head Luan Enjie also confirmed in March that the feasibility study for the super-heavy-lift LM-9, expected to take taikonauts to the moon in the 2030s, had “basically concluded,” allowing research to begin in earnest.

Escalation of “Wolf Warrior” Tactics

In 2021, Chinese diplomats matched the uncompromising tone set by CCP leadership, deepening their embrace of “wolf warrior” behavior distinctive for its confrontational and belligerent style. This year, China’s diplomats abandoned much of their remaining decorum as they levied sensationalist accusations and used disinformation against other countries.† In February 2021, top diplomat Yang Jiechi demonstrated China’s uncompromising approach by laying out a list of policy changes he demanded the new Biden Administration make to improve the U.S.-China relationship. In his speech, Yang defined a “constructive relationship” between the United States and China as one that required the United States government to aban-

* There is no international requirement to design rockets to reenter under control, but experts view it as a best practice. The initial LM-5B flight in 2020 was the first intentionally uncontrolled reentry of an object exceeding 10 metric tons since 1990. Jonathan McDowell (@planet4589), “Before the CZ-5B started flying there were NO ‘by design’ uncontrolled reentries above 10 tonnes since 1990. DOS-6 (Salyut-7), STS-107 and Fobos-Grunt were all failures,” Twitter, May 2, 2021, 8:53 p.m.

silent on the Chinese government’s destabilizing behavior toward Taiwan and human rights violations in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Yang’s framing suggests China no longer seeks to cooperate or find common ground but rather is now dictating that the United States must submit to all of China’s preferences. In a June 2021 interview, China’s ambassador to France Lu Shaye summarized China’s diplomacy in plainer terms. “We’re doing things differently now,” he boasted. “Get used to it.” At times, Chinese aggressive “wolf warrior” behavior appeared intentionally designed to provoke outrage. In April 2021, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission’s social media account posted an image juxtaposing a recent Chinese space launch with pictures of cremation pyres and hazmat suits in India, apparently mocking India’s COVID-19 crisis. In July, the Chinese consul general in Rio de Janeiro mocked a deadly building collapse in Surfside, Florida, on Twitter by juxtaposing a picture of U.S. President Joe Biden with the collapsed building and appending the caption, “‘America is coming back!’ But none of the people buried in the ruins has come back!!!” Referencing this pattern of behavior, a senior German official explained, “Dialogue is now conditional on us not criticizing China.” Notably, Beijing’s provocative rhetoric is most frequently targeted at the United States, Japan, Taiwan, and issues pertaining to China’s sovereignty claims. Still, China’s diplomats have also turned their “wolf warrior” tactics against developing countries.†

China’s leaders appeared aware of, though unconcerned with, the negative global reception to their “wolf warrior” diplomats. Instead, they continued projecting confidence in what China Media Project Director David Bandurski described as the “unshakable premise that China’s system is superior in terms of its performance,” leading them to dismiss any criticism as “strong ideological bias and cultural prejudice.” CCP leaders have actively sold this message to Chinese citizens. According to Steve Tsang, director of the University of London’s China Institute, China’s belligerent diplomatic rhetoric stems from “a revamp of the Communist Party’s social contract with the Chinese people” emphasizing legitimacy drawn from the promise of a powerful China that commands global respect. As such, CCP leaders have directed and sustained their diplomats’ aggressive posture.

*The belligerent turn by China’s diplomats draws upon longstanding tendencies in the diplomacy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Peter Martin, author of the book China’s Civilian Army on China’s diplomatic history, assesses that since the PRC’s founding, China’s diplomats have consistently shown “they were more concerned about looking weak in front of domestic audiences than truly improving China’s reputation.” Chinese leaders temporarily restrained some of these tendencies during much of the country’s reform era to align with former leader Deng Xiaoping’s dictum to “hide your strength and bide your time.” After General Secretary Xi took office, China’s diplomats responded to his encouragement of a more hawkish foreign policy by gradually dialing up their aggressive behavior. In 2019, this trend escalated sharply after Zhao Lijian’s promotion from minister counsellor in Islamabad to foreign ministry spokesperson demonstrated that CCP leaders would reward “wolf warrior” behavior. Peter Martin, China’s Civilian Army; The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Oxford University Press, 2021, 195, 216–218, 224.

†China’s diplomats have resorted to bullying and even violent criminal behavior targeting developing countries. For example, at the 2018 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, Chinese diplomats physically forced their way into the hosting Papua New Guinea foreign minister’s office to demand diplomatic concessions. In October 2020, Chinese diplomats physically beat a Taiwan trade office librarian in Fiji, leaving the victim concussed and hospitalized, amid their concern that Fiji might switch diplomatic recognition from Mainland China to Taiwan. Peter Martin, China’s Civilian Army; The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, Oxford University Press, 2021, 1–2, 223.
At a May 2021 Politburo group study session, General Secretary Xi appeared to acknowledge China's poor international image by calling on its diplomats to create a “trustworthy, lovable, and venerable” image of China amid a global “struggle” over public opinion. The speech was more likely an emphasis on the stakes of China’s international propaganda, however, rather than a criticism of its diplomats’ aggressive style. As Zhang Weiwei, director of Fudan University’s Institute for Chinese Studies, explained about the speech, any adverse international reaction to “telling China’s story well” is “mainly a problem on the part of the ‘West’” and not the fault of Chinese diplomats. Ambassador Lu Shaye further clarified the future direction of Chinese diplomacy several weeks after General Secretary Xi’s remarks, claiming in an interview that China’s aggressive approach was justified and would continue. The “fundamental reasons behind changes in China’s diplomatic style,” he explained, “are changes in the international situation and in China’s power.”

Using Vaccine Diplomacy to Build a Sphere of Influence

Meanwhile, China attempted to cast itself as a leader of developing countries and the only source of readily available COVID-19 vaccines for much of the world. In a speech at the Global Health Summit in May 2021, General Secretary Xi emphasized the need to provide more COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries and presented China as a model in this effort. While the United States has donated more than 175 million COVID-19 vaccine doses worldwide and contributed to the international COVAX initiative to distribute vaccines, however, China has primarily sold rather than donated vaccine doses to other countries, including many in Africa and Latin America. China’s vaccines have also proved less effective in preventing infections from COVID-19, with many countries that paid for China’s vaccines continuing to face outbreaks despite high vaccination rates.

At times, China suggested that its vaccine exports were part of a zero-sum competition with the United States and other countries. In many developing countries, China capitalized on sometimes slower deliveries by U.S. and European vaccine manufacturers to claim it was the only provider of vaccines. In a June 2021 visit to Indonesia, for instance, Foreign Minister Wang reportedly accused a “handful of developed countries” of having “hoarded vaccines.” The foreign minister’s message carried an air of triumphalism in Indonesia, where Chinese Sinovac vaccines comprised 89 percent of the 95 million doses the country received in the first half of 2021.

China also used vaccine exports as a diplomatic cudgel by treating them as leverage over recipient countries. In October 2020, China announced it would give Malaysia priority access to its vaccines, after which Malaysia promptly released 60 Chinese sailors who had been detained for trespassing in its territorial waters. After receiving Chinese vaccines, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte ordered his ministers to refrain from publicly criticizing China for incursions by hundreds of Chinese fishing vessels in the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In another instance, Ukraine withdrew from a UN Human Rights Council statement calling for an independent investigation of human rights abuses in Xinjiang.
after China threatened to block a planned vaccine shipment to the country. Nevertheless, China’s efforts to extract a political price for its vaccines were not uniformly successful. When Paraguay suffered soaring COVID-19 infection rates in early 2021, China’s diplomats saw an opportunity to pressure the country into severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Paraguay refused to respond to China’s inducements, however, with President Mario Benitez explicitly stating Paraguay would not “accept any kind of blackmail for vaccine purchases.” He added that the country remained open to engaging with Chinese vaccine producers “without any type of conditions involving our diplomatic relations.”

Questions Mount over Chinese Transparency on Vaccines and COVID-19 Origins

Already faced with poor results from Chinese vaccines in combating earlier strains of COVID-19, Chinese officials have also been unable to demonstrate that their vaccines are effective against the COVID-19 Delta variant. China’s National Health Commission has declined to comment on the efficacy of Chinese vaccines in preventing infections from the Delta variant. Rather than providing data on vaccine efficacy, Chinese officials have encouraged containment measures such as distancing and avoiding gatherings to curb Delta variant transmission, likely reflecting their doubts about Chinese vaccines. Chinese officials have also suppressed efforts to access information on the efficacy of Chinese vaccines. In one instance, a People’s Daily reporter was disciplined for requesting information on how many new COVID-19 infections in China are among vaccinated people, which health authorities did not provide. Facing this lack of data, countries in Southeast Asia that previously relied heavily on Sinovac vaccine doses purchased from China began supplementing these inoculations with the Pfizer and BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca vaccines, including millions of doses donated by the United States.

Confrontation over Calls for Greater Transparency in COVID-19 Investigations

China’s resistance to a full, transparent international investigation into the origins of COVID-19 reinforced questions about a lab leak being a possible origin of the pandemic. In May 2021, President Biden called for a 90-day intelligence review to allow the U.S. government to “redouble their efforts” to further study the origins of the virus. After U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said China could face international isolation if it did not allow proper investigations into the origins of the virus, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson called the statement a “blatant threat.” The intelligence assessment, delivered to President Biden in August 2021, did not offer a definitive conclusion on the origins of the virus. The assessment noted “China’s cooperation most likely would be needed to reach a conclusive assessment” on the virus’ origins, but that Chinese officials hindered the investigation, preventing U.S. officials from reaching a definitive conclusion.
New Evidence of Strength and Constraints in China-Russia Entente

China and Russia continued to deepen ties throughout 2021 as they celebrated the 20th anniversary of a pact that laid the basis for their multifaceted cooperation today. At the same time, Russia's independent diplomatic engagements with India and the United States underscored the opportunistic nature of the Sino-Russian relationship.

Sino-Russian defense cooperation over the past year signaled to Washington the two countries' closeness. Military exercises improved their ability to operate together in ways that could allow them to simultaneously contest U.S. interests. Chinese troops and equipment from the PLA's Western Theater Command participated in Russia's large-scale Kavkaz-2020 strategic military exercise over five days in the fall of 2020, practicing joint live fire-strike, mobile defense, and battlefield situation control. Chinese troops and wheeled equipment traveled to Russia on several Y-20 transport aircraft, marking the first time China had sent Y-20 transport aircraft with military cargo beyond its borders. In December 2020, Russian and Chinese bombers flew a second joint patrol mission over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea after their first ever joint aerial patrol in 2019. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed the joint mission was intended to "increase the level of cooperation between the two militaries, expand their ability for joint action and strengthen strategic stability." Both activities reinforce the trend in recent years toward Sino-Russian exercises that are increasingly frequent, geographically varied, and complex, raising concerns the two could coordinate their military capabilities to challenge U.S. interests abroad. Even so, some observers argue the exercises remain superficial and do not yet meaningfully improve the two countries' interoperability.

Concern among some observers also grew over the potential combined threat posed by the two countries in the nuclear domain. China's significant expansion of its nuclear arsenal prompted Admiral Charles A. Richard, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, to express concern about the potentially "additive" nuclear threat posed by the two countries, particularly if they choose to work together. (For more, see Chapter 3, Section 2: "China's Nuclear Forces: Moving beyond a Minimal Deterrent.")

China and Russia continued to take complementary positions on key diplomatic issues and to expand joint scientific initiatives. In March 2021, both countries blocked a UN Security Council resolution to condemn the military coup in Burma (Myanmar). The two countries also made progress toward their goal of building a joint research base on the moon. The heads of the Chinese and Russian space agencies signed a memorandum of understanding on the planned lunar base in March and formally invited other countries and international organizations to join the project in April.* The moves came just months after Russia's space agency Roscosmos condemned U.S. plans for a lunar Gateway, part of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Artemis lunar exploration

*As of August 2021, no countries or international organizations had formally joined the project.
program, as too “U.S.-centric” and indicated it could withdraw from the International Space Station partnership in 2025. According to a promotional video released by Roscosmos, the Sino-Russian lunar base will develop in three phases: reconnaissance with probes until 2025, construction from 2026 to 2035, and utilization from 2036.

Meanwhile, Russia and India for the first time held a “two plus two” meeting of their foreign and defense ministers in April 2021 that one former Indian official argued was Russia’s way of signaling that close relations with China would not limit its strategic autonomy or arms sales to India. After a telephone call in April 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin also met with President Biden at a summit in Geneva in June. Some observers speculated that Chinese leaders were anxiously watching the aftermath of the phone call and summit for any signs that Russia could be aligning itself more closely with the United States. Chinese commentators argued the meeting was intended to drive a wedge between Russia and China.

**Chinese Sanctions Dash Hopes for Using European Countries as Counterweight**

Sanctions China levied against the UK and EU undermined Beijing’s hopes to use ties with European countries as a strategic counterweight against growing tensions with the United States. In January 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang described the year ahead as a critical “turning point” for China-EU relations and called for deepening trust and coordination with the EU amid what he described as the “most severe situation” in U.S.-China relations in over 40 years. He further trumpeted the then-recently signed EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment as a symbol of the two sides’ deepening ties. Nevertheless, Beijing jeopardized the agreement two months later by sanctioning members of the European Parliament as well as European academics after the UK and EU governments joined the United States and Canada in sanctioning Chinese officials over their human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Beijing’s countersanctions turned European opinion sharply against it and created political pressure against approving the investment agreement. The heads of 37 European research institutions cosigned a statement in response to the sanctions, expressing concerns that “targeting independent researchers and civil society institutions undermines practical and constructive engagement” and harms Europe-China relations more broadly. The European Parliament reported in April that before it would consider approving the investment deal, China must first not only lift the sanctions it imposed on the UK and EU members but also lift the sanctions it imposed on other countries. China’s retaliatory sanctions, which were not authorized by any specific Chinese law, prohibit sanctioned individuals and their families from entering China, including Hong Kong and Macau, and any companies and institutions affiliated with the individuals from doing business with China. China’s sanctions against Europe followed an earlier round of sanctions in January aimed at just-departed officials from the Trump Administration, which China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused of acting against China’s interests out of “bias and hatred.”
imposed on EU entities and individuals but also present a timetable for ratifying and implementing the International Labor Organization’s forced labor conventions and recommit to upholding its commitments to Hong Kong. The European Parliament overwhelmingly voted to “freeze” discussion of the deal in May, making clear it would not approve abandoning what they saw as European values for the purpose of increased trade.

Europe pushed back against concerning Chinese actions in other ways over the past year. The EU’s new foreign investment screening framework, inspired by the need to block predatory acquisitions from Chinese entities, became fully operational in October 2020. The framework sets minimum standards for EU member states’ investment screening regimes, though it does not harmonize national-level screening mechanisms or require member states to introduce any such screening. In November 2020, the European Parliament suspended an EU-China Friendship Group of lawmakers advocating for closer ties with China over concern the group was too close to the Chinese government. In April 2021, the Council of the European Union released its first ever Indo-Pacific strategy, recognizing the EU’s need to actively engage with partners in the region to maintain its rules-based order in the face of China’s challenges to that order.

Notable National-Level Policy Shifts

Amid the debate in Brussels regarding EU policy toward China, some of Europe’s leading governments signaled their own policy shifts. In June 2021, the powerful Federation of German Industries, which is often seen as a bellwether for Berlin’s largely trade-driven foreign policy, criticized China’s new anti-sanctions law as creating uncertainty and harming the business environment. In July, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered a national security review of a Chinese-owned firm’s purchase of the UK’s largest semiconductor producer. Although the transaction ultimately proceeded in August, a UK government spokesperson stated that the UK’s National Security Advisor “will continue to monitor the situation closely” and “will not hesitate to take further action if needed.” Throughout 2021 the UK government also continued seeking to restrict the involvement of Chinese state-owned nuclear energy company China General Nuclear Power Group (CGN) in nuclear power plant projects in the country.

Cracks began to emerge in China’s influence over Central and Eastern European countries, many of which had previously been open to Chinese investment and trade. Some European leaders skipped a meeting of the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries forum, or the 17+1, which the Chi-

*The U.S. Department of Commerce added CGN to the Entity List in 2019. CGN is already heavily invested in financing two French-led nuclear power plant projects in the UK, Hinkley and Sizewell, and it seeks to build an additional plant at Bradwell that would feature its own nuclear reactor technology. In August 2020, members of the UK parliament began exploring measures to prevent CGN from participating in the Bradwell project. According to reports from July and September 2021, the UK government is moving toward a deal that could end CGN’s involvement in the Sizewell project. Reuters, “UK Looking at Deal to Remove China from Nuclear Project—Report,” September 25, 2021; Reuters, “UK Looks to Remove China’s CGN from Nuclear Power Projects—FT,” July 26, 2021; Jonathan Ford, Jim Packard, and Nathalie Thomas, “China Tensions Raise Doubts over UK Nuclear Projects,” Financial Times, August 5, 2020.
nese government set up in 2012 to directly influence the policies of individual European countries against the interests of the broader EU. When General Secretary Xi chaired a long-delayed 17+1 summit in February 2021, six member countries sent ministers instead of national leaders. The downgraded delegations showed some participants were frustrated enough by the lack of follow-through on promised Chinese investment to snub Beijing despite the high-level attention General Secretary Xi attempted to place on the meeting. In May, Lithuania became the first member of the group to quit the forum entirely. Lithuania then agreed to open a new “Taiwanese Representative Office” in Vilnius, the first representative office Taiwan has established in Europe since 2003 and its first in any European country to bear the name “Taiwan” rather than “Taipei.” In response, the Chinese government expelled Lithuania’s ambassador and recalled its own ambassador before escalating tensions by suspending a rail link to Lithuania.

Expanding Influence in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia

While it grew increasingly confrontational toward European and other democracies, China made concerted efforts to deepen its influence in developing countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. In the Middle East, Beijing demonstrated an increased appetite for involvement and its interest in using ties to Middle Eastern countries to globally promote its alternative definition of human rights. In March 2021, Foreign Minister Wang visited Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Oman.

China and Iran made headlines when the two nations inked a $400 billion economic and security cooperation agreement in March 2021 after five years of negotiations. The wide-ranging deal, which many experts consider a political maneuver against the United States, seeks to boost Chinese investment in Iran’s infrastructure over 25 years in exchange for discounted access to Iranian oil and gas. The pact also calls for strengthened political and defense ties between the two countries. Despite the deal’s ambitious investment goal, questions remain whether the agreement truly signals a sustainable intensification of China-Iran economic ties, with a growing number of China-Middle East experts surmising that the “terms, significance, and price of the agreement have all been greatly exaggerated.” China is also likely to carefully calibrate deepening its ties with Iran due to its fear of antagonizing other close partners in the region such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Foreign Minister Wang also sought to deepen China’s ties to Arab states, emphasizing China’s agreement with Arab countries to build a “China-Arab community of common destiny.” Speaking at the end of the trip, he attempted to frame China’s ties with the Middle East as representing an alternative view of international norms, announcing that China and the Middle Eastern countries he visited “believe that the view of human rights in some ‘Western’ countries does not represent the international view on human rights.” Building on the momentum from these state visits to the region, China managed to garner widespread support later in the year from the Arab world concerning its treatment of Uyghur Muslims, with a majority of the Arab Gulf states publicly praising China’s “counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang.”

In May 2021, Chinese diplomats made further attempts to promote China as an alternative leader in the region and criticize the United States, accusing Washington of “standing on the opposite side of international justice” in its position on the 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas. The violence in Gaza also generated tensions in China’s generally warm relations with Israel, prompting Chinese authorities to call on “all parties, especially Israel… [to] exercise restraint and stop hostilities immediately.” China’s relations with Israel faced additional strain when an August 2021 report revealed that Chinese operatives, posing as Iranian hackers, carried out a series of coordinated cyberattacks “against Israeli government institutions, IT providers, and telecommunications entities” between 2019 and 2020.

Finally, China continued using COVID-19 diplomacy in an attempt to increase its influence in the region. China’s most important Middle Eastern partners in COVID-19 diplomacy are the UAE and Bahrain, both of which participated in phase III trials of the Sinopharm vaccine and were among the earliest adopters worldwide of the vaccine in 2020. In March 2021, Sinopharm entered into a joint venture with an Abu Dhabi-based technology company, allowing the UAE to become the first country to produce the Sinopharm vaccine outside of China. The joint venture also includes plans for a research and development center for life sciences and medicine.

*Despite mounting international pressure over China’s systemic campaign of oppression against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in the far western region, support for China’s actions remains strong in much of the Arab world. To date, nearly every country in the Middle East has expressed support for China’s policies on issues related to Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet in one capacity or another, citing opposition to “interference in China’s internal affairs under the pretext of human rights.” Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE have also reportedly collaborated with Chinese authorities to arrest and deport Uyghur Muslims seeking refuge in the Middle East. In October 2020, a number of leaders from Middle Eastern countries signed onto a joint statement during the General Debate at the Third Committee of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, praising China for its efforts in combating the “threats of terrorism and extremism” within its borders. In June 2021, 10 Middle Eastern nations were among 69 countries that issued a joint statement at the 47th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, criticizing countries for interfering in China’s internal affairs “under the pretext of human rights.” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, “Cuba Made a Joint Statement on Behalf of 45 Countries in Firm Support of China’s Counter-Terrorism and Deradicalization Measures in Xinjiang,” October 6, 2020; Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland, “Joint Statement of 69 Countries at the Interactive Dialogue on High Commissioner’s Annual Report at the 47th Session of the Human Rights Council,” June 22, 2021; Jonathan Hoffman, “Why Do Some Muslim-Majority Countries Support China’s Crackdown on Muslims?” Washington Post, May 4, 2021; Jomana Karadsheh and Gul Tuysuz, “Uyghurs Are Being Deported from Muslim Countries, Raising Concerns about China’s Growing Reach,” CNN, June 8, 2021; Middle East Monitor, “UAE, Saudi, Egypt Deporting Uyghurs to China, Report Says,” June 9, 2021. 
biotechnology, indicating China's interest in using the pandemic to establish a permanent foothold in the region's biomedical sector.  

Continued Promotion of a China Model in Africa

The CCP stepped up its promotion of China's political and developmental model to Africa over the past year. In a December 2020 online briefing for African political party leaders, CCP International Liaison Department head Song Tao described to his African interlocutors “enlightenments acquired by the Party throughout the years of its development” and asserted “the Chinese system... can serve as a reference to all developing countries including African countries in their pursuit of independent progress.” He further encouraged African party leaders to increase exchanges between their parties and the CCP on the topic of governance and to support more people-to-people interactions between their countries and China.

China undertook a flurry of diplomatic activity in Africa throughout early 2021 to prepare for the upcoming Forum for China-Africa Cooperation, held once every three years. In early January 2021, Foreign Minister Wang visited Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Botswana, Tanzania, and Seychelles, continuing a 31-year tradition prioritizing Africa for the Chinese foreign minister’s first overseas visit of the year. During the trip, Botswana and the DRC signed memoranda of understanding to officially join China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), bringing the total number of participating African countries to 46. While in the DRC, Foreign Minister Wang agreed to cancel approximately $28 million in interest-free loans from the Chinese government to the DRC government that had matured in 2020. He also agreed to provide $17 million in additional financial support to the DRC and to fund the refurbishment of the DRC’s foreign ministry headquarters. In April 2021, China agreed to construct an annex to Ghana’s foreign ministry building, while the Kenyan government revealed in May 2021 that China had agreed to fund construction of a new building for Kenya’s foreign ministry. After concluding agreements with China earlier in the year, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi nonetheless demonstrated a willingness to push for a more equitable relationship with Beijing by calling for the renegotiation of mining contracts with foreign companies operating in the DRC, the great majority of which are Chinese.

Strengthening Ties in Central Asia

In Central Asia, China’s diplomacy in 2021 centered on improving its strategic position amid the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and expanding China-led mechanisms for regional coopera-

*According to Foreign Minister Wang, $15 million of the total $17 million will be used to support development projects in the DRC, while the remaining $2 million will be used to support the DRC in its leadership of the African Union in 2021. February 22, 2021, “President Felix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo Elected Chair of the AU for the Year 2021—Five Member Bureau Elected to Support the Work of the Assembly,” February 22, 2021; Jevans Nyabiage, “China Cancels Democratic Republic of Congo Loans as It Joins Belt and Road,” South China Morning Post, January 7, 2021.

tion. Against the backdrop of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Foreign Minister Wang hosted a nine-member delegation of senior Taliban officials in late July led by the Taliban’s chief negotiator and cofounder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin, signaling “warming ties” between China and the Islamist militant group. Beijing’s motives for strengthening relations with the Taliban have largely been driven by its fears that Afghanistan could become a potential hub for Uyghur militants from Xinjiang and other insurgent groups operating near the China-Afghan border, as well as by its desire to secure its economic assets in the region.

Beijing has pledged support for the Taliban in the form of economic support and investment for Afghanistan’s reconstruction, with Chinese authorities urging the Taliban to “make a clean break with terrorist forces,” including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Despite having historical connections with Xinjiang’s Uyghur militant groups affiliated with al Qaeda, the Taliban agreed it would prevent Uyghur separatist fighters, some of whom had previously sought refuge in Afghanistan, from entering and operating in Afghanistan. In early September 2021, the new Taliban government claimed China as its “most important partner” because of Beijing’s readiness to invest in Afghanistan following the group’s forcible takeover of the country. Also in September, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson praised the Taliban’s formation of an interim government as a “necessary step for Afghanistan to restore domestic order and pursue post-war reconstruction.” Despite these overtures, many experts have assessed China’s cooperation with the Taliban to be reluctant at best, particularly given China’s campaign against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Taliban will likely seek to “assuage China’s concerns” and are “eager to secure Beijing’s acquiescence to their rule” in an effort to obtain greater international legitimacy.

China also maintained positive relations with neighboring Pakistan. In June 2021, Foreign Minister Wang announced that China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan had agreed to support the “substantial expansion” of BRI in Afghanistan and expressed interest in extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor into the country. In July, Prime Minister Imran Khan supported the Chinese government’s actions in Xinjiang and lauded the CCP for providing the world a “better alternate governance model” superior to the democratic system of “Western” countries.

China also expanded its diplomatic engagement with other Central Asian countries. On May 12, Foreign Minister Wang hosted foreign ministers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan for the second Foreign Ministers Meeting of a new China-led grouping called “China + Central Asia” (C+C5). The membership of the C+C5 grouping overlaps considerably with the original membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an organization founded between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2001. China initially used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a framework to deepen cooperation with Central Asian states without arousing a defensive reaction from Russia, which considered post-Soviet states its sphere of influence. In contrast, the C+C5 grouping is notable for Russia not being a member. China Foreign Ministry, Wang Yi Talks about Eight-Point Consensus and Ten Outcomes of “China + Central Asia” Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, May 12, 2021; Casey Michel, “It’s Official: India and Pakistan Join Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” Diplomat, June 12, 2017; China Daily, “History of Development of SCO,” June 12, 2006; Edward Lemon, Research Assistant Professor, Texas A&M
group released statements outlining plans for increased cooperation in the economic and security domains and pledged mutual support of each other’s “core interests,” likely reflecting China’s desire to prevent Central Asian states from criticizing it on issues it considers sensitive, such as Taiwan and Xinjiang. The countries also discussed increasing security cooperation under the framework of BRI, creating a new initiative under the project they termed the “Safe Silk Road.” In particular, they pledged to increase counterterrorism efforts in light of the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

**Chinese Coercion Prompts Indo-Pacific Countries to Strengthen Ties with the United States**

China’s increasing use of coercion in the Indo-Pacific prompted enhanced efforts by countries in the region to balance against China’s aggressive tactics. A key country leading these efforts was Japan, whose relationship with China continued to deteriorate over the past year. In February 2021, Japan’s government canceled an anticipated state visit by General Secretary Xi, which would have been the first official visit by a CCP general secretary to Japan since 2008. Japan’s government had already postponed a visit in 2020 due to concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party urged the government to cancel the visit altogether given “grave concerns” about “the principles of freedom, human rights, [and] democracy.” Some Japanese lawmakers continued to politically oppose the state visit in 2021. While Japan’s government did not announce that General Secretary Xi’s visit was cancelled for these reasons, the announcement that he would not visit Japan in 2021 was nonetheless a high-profile sign of tensions in the China-Japan relationship.

Meanwhile, China continued escalating its military coercion in Japanese airspace and waters. In 2021, Chinese government ships set the longest recorded streak of 112 consecutive days sailing in the contiguous zone† of the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands. In 2021, Chinese government ships sailed around the Senkaku Islands for 112 consecutive days, a record that surpassed the previous record of 111 days set in 2020. These actions demonstrate China’s trend of setting, then exceeding, such records on an annual basis since 2019. Prior to 2019, the record for the longest streak of consecutive days Chinese government ships sailed around the Senkaku Islands was in 2013. U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Maritime Zones and Boundaries*, 2021.

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† Under international law, coastal states are entitled to territorial seas, which extend up to 12 nautical miles from their baseline, such as a continental shelf, and a contiguous zone, which extends up to 24 nautical miles from that baseline. Within their contiguous zones, states may exercise control needed to prevent infringement of laws within their territorial seas. These actions demonstrate China’s trend of setting, then exceeding, such records on an annual basis since 2019. Prior to 2019, the record for the longest streak of consecutive days Chinese government ships sailed around the Senkaku Islands was in 2013. U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Maritime Zones and Boundaries*, 2021.
March, the PLA Navy sent a Type 055 (RENHAI) warship through the Sea of Japan for the first time, which a Global Times article suggested was in response to a U.S.-Japan joint statement that “seriously provoked China” by emphasizing the importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait. One month later, the PLA Navy sailed its Liaoning carrier group through the Miyako Strait, leading some experts to assess that the PLA is signaling to Japan its ability to “punch through” the First Island Chain.

Japan also grew more vocal in its support for Taiwan. In addition to referring to the importance of stability in the Taiwan Strait during a summit between President Biden and then Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide in April 2021, Japan for the first time stated the same in a joint statement with the EU and in its annual defense white paper. In June, the Financial Times reported that in 2020 U.S. and Japanese military officials “began serious planning for a possible conflict” against China over Taiwan.

In July, Japan’s Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso was even more explicit in describing the importance of Taiwan to Japan, stating that an attack on Taiwan may also be a “threat to Japan’s survival,” in which case “Japan and the U.S. must defend Taiwan together.” In August, Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party announced plans to initiate a security dialogue with Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party, noting the talks were requested by the Japanese side. (For more on Japan’s growing engagement with Taiwan, see Chapter 4, “A Dangerous Period for Cross-Strait Deterrence: Chinese Military Capabilities and Decision-Making for a War over Taiwan.”)

Japanese Policy and Public Opinion Harden against China

Japan’s government suggested it was preparing to take historic steps to increase defense spending in the face of mounting pressure from China. In May 2021, the Liberal Democratic Party proposed that Japan “drastically increase” its defense budget in response to China’s coercive behavior in the region. In June, Japan’s Ministry of Defense announced it had shed its self-imposed cap of spending no more than one percent of Japan’s gross domestic product on defense. Following Prime Minister Suga’s resignation from office in September, Japan’s Ministry of Defense announced it would review the country’s core national security guidelines, citing the fact that the security and technological environment in the region had “changed significantly” since Japan formulated its first national security strategy in 2013. Fumio Kishida, who took office as Japanese prime minister in October, has supported Japan’s shift toward a more proactive foreign and defense policy. During his campaign, Prime Minister Kishida called for Japan to stand up for universal values and human rights “in the face of the expansion of authoritarian regimes like China” and to develop the capability to strike Chinese missile bases in response to a hypothetical PLA attack.

Japan’s policy changes align with the Japanese public’s growing support for a more proactive foreign and defense policy. A Nikkei poll taken in April 2021 found that 74 percent of Japan’s public sup-

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ports the government taking an active role in cultivating stability in the Taiwan Strait. Similarly, a Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs poll taken in March found that 69 percent of respondents wanted Japan’s government to take a “strong stance” against China Coast Guard ships entering Japan’s waters.*

The Quad Takes New Steps

Other counterbalancing efforts were led by countries comprising the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad (the United States, Australia, India, and Japan) and included other participants from the region. In a historical first, the Quad countries’ heads of government met in March 2021, producing a joint statement affirming their commitment to “a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law” that will “counter threats to [security and prosperity] in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.” The leaders further committed to regular senior level meetings and held their first in-person summit at the White House in September, releasing a joint statement recommitting to a vision of a rules-based order “undaunted by coercion.” The Quad countries maintained a regular dialogue with vice foreign ministers of New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam, a grouping outside observers called the “Quad-plus,” meeting 15 times between March 20, 2020, and March 19, 2021.

The Quad partnership addressed a broad range of issues. The joint statement following the Quad summit in March noted that future objectives for the group included delivering COVID-19 vaccines, collaborating on international standards for technology, and leading efforts to address climate change. Following their summit in September, Quad leaders additionally committed to advance secure and transparent 5G and “beyond-5G” networks and to secure supply chains of critical technologies and materials such as semiconductors. Quad countries also stepped up cooperation between their space programs. In October 2020, a U.S.-India joint statement announced the two countries would begin sharing space situational awareness information. In early 2021, the India Space Research Organization also signed agreements with the Australian Space Agency and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency to increase cooperation on space-related issues.

Chinese leaders and scholars were critical of the Quad’s growth. Immediately after the March summit, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian described the grouping as an “exclusive clique” that he warned “will neither receive a welcome nor have its way.” In May 2021, China’s ambassador to Bangladesh warned his host country’s officials that any future collaboration with the Quad would “substantially damage” the China-Bangladesh relationship. In June, President Biden mentioned that General Secretary Xi had urged him previously to refrain from working with Quad countries. In response to the Quad’s cooperation, China indicated it might seek to deepen its own security relationships in the region.

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*In one illustration of Japan’s changing approach to China, the cover of the Ministry of Defense’s annual defense white paper depicted an armored samurai mounted on a charging horse. In contrast, in 2020 the defense white paper’s cover had depicted an idyllic scene of Mount Fuji. Ken Moriyasu, “A Tale of Two Covers: Japan’s Message on Taiwan Draws US Notice,” Nikkei Asia, July 21, 2021.
In a May 2021 interview, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi hinted at one such possibility, suggesting decisions on plans for a PLA Navy base in Pakistan “depends on how the Quad turns out.”

Problems Linger from China’s Deadly Clash with India

Unresolved tensions from the deadly 2020 clash between the PLA and the Indian Armed Forces continued to shape both countries’ policies in 2021. The fatal border clash and following standoff were, according to a former Indian security official, a “very fundamental change” that drove revisions in India’s “whole policy and discourse around China.” In a February 2021 interview, Indian Army Lieutenant General Y K Joshi said India was “absolutely on the brink” with the PLA in August 2020. Satellite imagery showed Indian and PLA tanks fewer than 500 feet apart at that time. In an April 2021 speech to Chinese and Indian scholars, Indian Ambassador to China Vikram Misri noted an “inadvisable” tendency among Chinese diplomats “to sweep [the border conflict] under the carpet and characterize it as just a minor issue,” which he warned was “tantamount to running away from the problem.” In the same speech, the ambassador said sustained dialogue and “complete disengagement in all friction areas” would be a necessary first step toward “restoring trust and confidence in the relationship... that was damaged through last year's actions.”

Chinese and Indian forces disengaged at two of four standoff locations along their disputed border in 2021, but limited discussions on troop withdrawal make further disengagement uncertain. In August, an unusually large patrol of over 100 PLA troops entered disputed territory in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, emerging from multiple locations to venture several miles into territory administered by India before departing after three hours. Both militaries are hardening their positions along the disputed border beyond the existing standoff locations. China has taken a new step in building “militarized village[s]” that position electronic warfare and air defense stations close to India. It constructed several of these villages in neighboring Bhutan, which researcher Robert Barnett describes as part of an effort to “force the Bhutanese government to cede territory that China wants elsewhere in Bhutan to give Beijing a military advantage in its struggle with New Delhi.” The militarized villages are part of China’s “Plan for the Construction of Moderately Well-Off Villages in the Border Area of the Tibet Autonomous Region,” which describes building 628 such villages near the contested border between 2017 and 2020 under the guise of “poverty alleviation.”

Shortly after the 2020 border dispute and continuing through 2021, PLA cyberespionage and other Chinese state-sponsored organizations significantly increased their attacks on targets in India. One Chinese group, using techniques and resources similar to those of hackers affiliated with the PLA and Ministry of State Security, launched a “concerted campaign against India’s critical infrastructure,” targeting at least ten regionally important nodes in India’s
power grid and two sea ports with cyberattacks. These attacks may have caused blackouts throughout India, including a blackout on October 13, 2020, in Mumbai that stopped trains and forced hospitals to rely on generators. At the time, local Indian media reported the cyber department in Maharashtra, the Indian state in which Mumbai is located, discovered malware that may have caused the power outage. Analysts at U.S. cybersecurity company Recorded Future also uncovered evidence suggesting a coordinated cyberattack took place against India’s power grid at the time of the power failure. Responding to the Recorded Future report, in March 2021 India’s Ministry of Power denied any power disruption “due to the referred threat” in a statement that declined to mention the Mumbai outage. In the first six months of 2021, another group closely affiliated with PLA cyberespionage units heavily targeted Indian aerospace companies, defense contractors, and telecommunications providers.

New Steps toward Decoupling from Chinese Technology

In 2021, India also expanded its 2020 policies to selectively restrict Chinese companies’ access to the country’s 5G and data markets. India’s Ministry of Communications did not include any Chinese companies in its May 2021 announcement listing participants selected to join trials to extend 5G network coverage in India. In addition, India’s Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology announced the government’s previously temporary ban on 59 Chinese smartphone applications was now permanent, citing privacy concerns.

Australia Rebuffs China’s Demands for Policy Changes

China unsuccessfully sought to compel Australia to make key policy concessions on more than a dozen matters ranging from Australia’s domestic freedom of expression to its international advocacy for an independent COVID-19 investigation, leading Australian perceptions of China to crater. The Chinese Embassy attempted to pressure Canberra in November 2020 by leaking an official list of 14 grievances Beijing told Canberra were “poisoning” Australia-China relations. The list claimed the bilateral relationship could be improved only if Australia changed its stance on many internal policy matters, such as by repealing Australia’s antiforeign interference laws, effectively demanding Canberra make it easier for agents of foreign influence to subvert its politics.

Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which Beijing also criticized in its list of complaints, testified to the Commission in January 2021 that China “seems to have dispensed with any pretense toward friendly relations” with

* These attacks may have been partially enabled by information Chinese hackers stole through Microsoft Exchange. Since 2017, Chinese hackers have been targeting foreign ministries and energy companies, including India’s Hindustan Petroleum Corp., accumulating five gigabytes of stolen data consistent with what Chinese state-sponsored hackers have previously targeted. The same trove of stolen data also includes information from Malaysia’s Petronas Nasional Berhad energy company and documents from the foreign ministries of Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, and Turkey. Kartikay Mehrotra, “Microsoft Exchange Used to Hack Diplomats before 2021 Breach,” Bloomberg, August 4, 2021.

Australia. Negative perceptions of China among Australians have increased fivefold in just three years as General Secretary Xi’s treatment of Australia has “lost the Australian heart and mind for a generation,” according to Mr. Jennings. An annual poll by Australia’s Lowy Institute found in 2021 that 63 percent of Australians now see China as “more of a security threat to Australia” than an economic partner, which is up from 41 percent in 2020 and 12 percent in 2018. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said in June 2021 that his government is ready to resume constructive dialogue with Beijing to resolve the “completely unconscionable” Chinese trade sanctions on Australian goods, but Beijing has not responded to overtures.

Canberra used new powers in 2021 to prevent Victoria State from pursuing its own agreements with China, completing a saga begun when Victoria signed its own BRI memorandum of understanding in 2018. Following criticism of the 2018 BRI memorandum and a subsequent 2019 framework agreement, the Australian Parliament in December 2020 approved a bill giving the foreign minister veto power over state and local agreements with foreign countries to ensure such agreements do not harm Australia’s interests. When Foreign Minister Marise Payne then canceled Victoria’s BRI agreements along with two other unrelated deals* in April 2021, the Chinese Embassy voiced “strong displeasure and opposition” even though a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs had earlier called the legislation an “internal affair” for Australia. Australia’s creation and use of this new oversight tool marked a significant setback for the CCP’s strategy of using subnational diplomacy to bypass national governments by directly incentivizing local governments to adopt policies favorable to China’s interests. (For more on the CCP’s strategy of subnational diplomacy, see Chapter 1, Section 2, “China’s Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.”)

Australia, the United States, and the UK also jointly announced a trilateral security pact in September 2021 that most observers perceived as a move to counterbalance China. Under the pact, known as AUKUS, the United States and the UK agreed to help Australia acquire a nuclear-powered submarine fleet by sharing advanced technology for nuclear propulsion. Such a fleet will enhance the three countries’ interoperability and efforts to counter Chinese military expansion across the Indo-Pacific. The pact will also strengthen U.S., UK, and Australian technological cooperation in cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and other undersea capabilities.

**Cracks Widen between China and Southeast Asia**

In 2021, China’s diplomatic achievements fell short of its ambitions in Southeast Asia. This year marked the 30th anniversary of the China-ASEAN relationship. In anticipation of the anniversary, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced two major diplomatic

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*The four Victoria State agreements canceled under the Foreign Arrangements Scheme were a 2004 memorandum of understanding on technical and vocational training with the Islamic Republic of Iran, a 1999 scientific cooperation agreement with the Syrian Arab Republic, a 2018 Belt and Road Initiative Memorandum of Understanding with China’s National Development and Reform Commission, and a 2019 Belt and Road Initiative Framework Agreement with the National Development and Reform Commission. Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Decisions under Australia’s Foreign Arrangements Scheme, April 21, 2021.
goals. First, it sought to elevate what it called the China-ASEAN “strategic partnership” to a “comprehensive strategic partnership,” a higher level of cooperation in China’s diplomatic parlance. Second, it wanted to complete long-ongoing negotiations over a South China Sea Code of Conduct.* Alexander Vuving, a researcher with the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Pacific Studies, noted that China’s diplomatic corps exerted “maximum pressure” on Southeast Asian countries to meet this 2021 goal.

China’s diplomats did not achieve either objective. The joint statement concluding the June 7 Foreign Minister’s Meeting only reaffirmed the China-ASEAN “strategic partnership” and made no mention of the Code of Conduct despite the 2020 joint statement’s acknowledgment of progress in Code of Conduct negotiations. Following the 2021 meeting, an ASEAN diplomat reportedly said China’s target for completing the Code of Conduct “has become more flexible” and that negotiations will extend into 2022. China’s diplomatic shortcomings with ASEAN are likely related to a simultaneous recognition and growing distrust of Chinese power in Southeast Asian countries. An annual survey of Southeast Asian policymakers and civic leaders found that 76 percent of respondents considered China to have the most economic influence in the region, but of these, 72 percent said it was a worrying development rather than a welcome one. Similarly, 49 percent of respondents said China had the most strategic-political influence in Southeast Asia, but of these, 89 percent said that was a worrying development.

New Chinese Provocations Elicit Opposition in the South China Sea

Throughout 2021, Chinese military and paramilitary forces continued to assert illegal maritime claims over much of the South China Sea. Among these incidents, China regularly singled out Malaysia and the Philippines, souring China’s relationship with both countries.† In November 2020, China Coast Guard ships began harassing a drilling rig and accompanying ships operating in Malay-

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* Chinese leaders consider the Code of Conduct a significant opportunity to set rules defining permissible activities in the South China Sea. Other South China Sea claimants, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, support the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea’s (UNCLOS) authority on permissible activities and for settling international disputes. Many South China Sea disputes not involving China do not rise to the level of international tribunals. In 2021 alone, Malaysia signed maritime cooperation agreements with Vietnam and Brunei, coordinating rather than competing in their overlapping claims. A Code of Conduct negotiated aside from UNCLOS would support China’s ambitions to selectively ignore international agreements.

† Both Malaysia and the Philippines have recently taken steps against China’s illegal maritime claims in the South China Sea. In December 2019, Malaysia submitted information to the UN about the limits of its continental shelf, claiming an expanded EEZ within the South China Sea pursuant to UNCLOS. In 2016, the Philippines won a unanimous award before an international tribunal declaring that China’s expansive maritime claims in the South China Sea have no basis. In March 2020, the Philippines cited the ruling to declare China’s expansive maritime claims illegitimate. China’s coercive behavior is driven by its desire for the maritime resources within its unlawful claims and as a means of deterring countries from appealing to international law.

sia’s EEZ only 44 nautical miles off Malaysia’s coast, the closest to shore such harassment had been recorded and escalating a pattern of harassment of Malaysian ships that began in late 2019. In June 2021, 16 PLA IL-76 and Y-20 transport aircraft, sufficient military airlift to carry an airborne battalion with its combat equipment,* flew within 60 nautical miles of Luconia Shoals, a feature Malaysia administers but China includes within its illegal maritime claims. Malaysia reported the PLA aircraft flew in “tactical formation” and were unresponsive to repeated requests for contact from regional air traffic control, which conveyed a clear threat regardless of whether any PLA troops were actually embarked. The PLA flight occurred shortly after Malaysia’s state-owned oil and gas company finished transporting materials to build a drilling platform in the same location.

The unusually provocative nature of the flight appeared to drive Malaysia to adopt new policies pushing back against China. Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein, who earlier in 2021 said to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang “you will always be my elder brother,” called the event a “breach” of “Malaysian airspace and sovereignty.” Two days after the event, Malaysia requested bids for a long-range air surveillance radar that would improve its aerial detection and tracking capabilities. On July 1, Malaysia announced it would partner with Ericsson to develop its 5G network despite appearing to favor China’s Huawei in 2020.†

China’s aggressive maritime activity also pushed the Philippines to adopt a more confrontational approach to China in 2021. On March 20, the Philippines’ National Task Force for monitoring South China Sea activities reported that approximately 220 Chinese fishing vessels, later confirmed to be maritime militia,‡ were moored within the Philippines’ EEZ at Whitsun Reef. Over the following week, the Philippines ordered navy patrols around Whitsun Reef and filed a diplomatic protest, while Australia, Canada, Japan, the UK, the United States, and Vietnam each voiced support. Shortly thereafter, much of China’s maritime militia dispersed to other areas within or just outside the Philippines EEZ, leaving a much smaller contingent of vessels behind.

Meanwhile, China’s maritime forces escalated their harassment activities near other features both China and the Philippines claim.

*According to Air University China Aerospace Studies Institute Director of Research Roderick Lee, 16 IL-76 and Y-20 aircraft would be able to deliver an airborne battalion, two artillery companies, and over one dozen lightly armored infantry transport vehicles. Roderick Lee (@roderick_s_lee), “Some context about what “16 aircraft” translates into (assuming they’re all Y-20s/IL-76s): That’s enough to deliver a full PLAAF Airborne light combined arms battalion, a howitzer company, rocket artillery company, 12–15 Mengshis as prime movers, and associated supplies.” Twitter, June 1, 2021, 2:12 p.m.

†Speaking in 2019, then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said Huawei “can spy as much as they like because we have no secrets.” Tashny Sukumaran, “Malaysia’s Mahathir Backs Huawei, Snubbing US Blacklist of Chinese Telecoms Giant," South China Morning Post, May 30, 2019.

‡In addition to its navy and coast guard, China operates the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia, a paramilitary force composed of armed civilians and their vessels, most of which are fishing boats. According to Naval War College professor Andrew Erickson and research associate Conor Kennedy, China’s maritime militia is a “state-organized, -developed, and -controlled force operating under a direct military chain of command to conduct Chinese state-sponsored activities,” which are typically provocations and skirmishes with sailors from other countries in the South China Sea. Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew S. Erickson, “China’s Third Sea Force, the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia: Tethered to the PLA,” China Maritime Studies Institute, March 2017, 2.
On April 9, PLA Navy Type 022 (HOUBEI) fast attack craft repelled Philippines reporters approaching Second Thomas Shoal, which is a feature the Philippines administers. Later that month, the Philippines Coast Guard accused China Coast Guard boats of “shadowing, blocking, dangerous maneuver, and radio challenges” near Scarborough Shoal. In May, the Philippines reported incursions by 287 Chinese maritime militia vessels in its EEZ. Philippines President Duterte publicly declared that China’s actions are psychological operations intended “just to show the Filipino that no matter how many times we go back there, nothing will happen because we are not in possession of the sea, it’s with them.” Rejecting China’s false narrative, the Philippines responded to China’s escalations by dispatching at least 13 vessels to conduct 57 patrols in the South China Sea from March through May 2021, escalating from three vessels conducting seven patrols across the ten months prior. In July, President Duterte reversed his 2020 decision to terminate the Philippines’ Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, which authorizes the rotational deployment of thousands of U.S. forces into the Philippines.

**U.S. Partners Grow their Military Presence in the South China Sea**

This year, Southeast Asian countries hedged against China’s rising power by continuing to build defenses in the South China Sea and by increasing military engagements with countries like India, Japan, and Australia in addition to the United States. The Philippines began building a logistics base and improving its maritime monitoring facilities on Thitu Island, which is only 12.4 nautical miles from China’s military base on Subi Reef.* Vietnam continued its own artificial island-building in the Spratlys, developing coastal defense installations able to host anti-air missiles and the country’s EXTRA artillery system (a precision-guided rocket system with the range to strike all of China’s bases in the Spratlys). Indonesia collaborated with the United States to build a maritime training center at the entrance to the Malacca Strait where the Indonesian Coast Guard will operate the center alongside U.S. agencies, including U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. Several Southeast Asian countries also increased their defense industry coordination with Quad countries. In 2021, Indonesia and India signed an agreement to jointly develop new naval vessels and technologies, replicating an agreement India already has with Malaysia and Vietnam. Vietnam also signed a defense agreement with Japan to acquire Japanese naval radar and surveillance equipment.

U.S. security partners also began increasing their naval activity in the South China Sea. In February 2021, France deployed a nuclear attack submarine to patrol the South China Sea. French Defense Minister Florence Parly called the patrol “extraordinary” and “striking proof of our French navy to deploy far away and for a long

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*In recent years, the Philippines had generally avoided repairs and upgrades to its facilities on Thitu Island due to Chinese pressure. The most visible expression of that pressure has been the presence of Chinese maritime militia vessels in the area. From December 2018 to March 2020, dozens of Chinese maritime militia vessels surrounded Thitu Island, tacitly threatening Philippine leaders against developing the feature further. Likely as a result, Philippines leaders often delayed ongoing construction projects. Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “The Long Patrol: Staredown at Thitu Island Enters Its Sixteenth Month,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2020.}
time, together with our Australian, American and Japanese strategic partners.” In April, the UK deployed a carrier strike group to join exercises with countries in Southeast Asia as it transited the South China Sea. In May 2021, the UK First Sea Lord announced that two offshore patrol vessels will be permanently stationed in the Indo-Pacific, with frigates to join in the future. India and Germany both followed suit in August 2021, with Germany sending a frigate into the South China Sea for the first time since 2002 and India sending a destroyer, a frigate, and two other ships. When asked by a Chinese reporter about the UK deployment, Wu Shicun, president of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs-affiliated National Institute for South China Sea Studies, suggested firing warning shots at the British ships, citing reports that Russian forces had fired in the path of a UK destroyer in the Black Sea in June.

China Undermines International Response to the Military Coup in Burma

On February 1, 2021, Burma’s military launched a coup d’état and detained President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and other senior government officials while launching sweeping crackdowns across the country. As of October 6, security forces have arrested 8,770 Burmese citizens and foreign advisors and killed 1,158 people. Hostilities in Burma may escalate further after some ousted civilian officials assembled to form a National Unity Government, which on September 7, 2021, announced a “defensive war” calling on armed civilians to target Burma’s military and its assets.

Chinese leaders continue to hedge between Burma’s military and the country’s ousted civilian government. Undermining international efforts to restore Burma’s civilian government, Chinese state media characterized the February coup as a “major cabinet reshuffle,” and China and Russia blocked a UN Security Council statement condemning the coup before later signing on to a statement condemning “violence against peaceful protestors.” As violence in Burma raged on, however, China closed its 1,320-mile border with Burma in July 2021 and agreed with the United States in September to block Burma’s military government from addressing the UN General Assembly that month. Meanwhile, Chinese officials have maintained relations with Burma’s ousted civilian leaders. In August 2021, Chinese officials reportedly told Burma’s military government that the former civilian government should continue to exist as a political party, which Chinese leaders reinforced by inviting the ousted leaders and three Burmese political parties to an online summit to discuss economic development.

Developments on the Korean Peninsula

China worked to enhance its diplomatic ties with North Korea following a decrease in bilateral engagement since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In celebration of the founding of the Korean Workers Party in October 2020, General Secretary Xi sent a mes-
sage to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un applauding his “strong leadership” and emphasizing China’s willingness to strengthen bilateral ties. In April 2021, China appointed senior diplomat Liu Xiaoming, a former ambassador to the UK known for his outspoken views on U.S.-China relations, as its special representative on Korean Peninsula affairs, where he will oversee Beijing’s relationship with both Pyongyang and Seoul. According to one analyst, his appointment reflected Chinese leaders’ view of the growing importance of North Korea and the broader Korean Peninsula in the context of an increasingly competitive U.S.-China relationship. The two countries’ leaders also exchanged messages to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the China-North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in July 2021.

China has also made efforts to strengthen bilateral relations with South Korea amid concerns over developments in the U.S.-South Korea alliance. In January 2021, President Moon Jae-in announced his intention to elevate bilateral ties to “a new height” and expressed his hopes to host General Secretary Xi in Seoul sometime this year. Nevertheless, an October 2020 Pew poll showing 75 percent of South Koreans had either somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable views of Beijing reflected the limits of China’s influence in South Korea. China also expressed concerns over South Korea potentially joining the Quad, with one Global Times article warning that South Korea joining the group would “inevitably damage the just restored strategic mutual trust between China and South Korea…. If Seoul joins the Quad, it will destroy such mutual trust.”

In May 2021, the U.S. terminated an agreement limiting the range of South Korea’s ballistic missiles, prompting Chinese concerns that the extension would now allow South Korean missiles to reach Beijing.

An Increasingly Adversarial U.S.-China Relationship

Tensions between the United States and China continued through the change in U.S. presidential administrations in 2021. China’s coercion against U.S. allies and partners like Australia and Taiwan,

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repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and lack of transparency over the origins of COVID-19 all drove new U.S. response measures.

In the final months of the Trump Administration, U.S. government agencies and high-level officials made statements that signaled significant shifts in U.S. policy toward China. In a December 2020 op-ed, then Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe called China the “greatest threat to democracy and freedom worldwide since World War II.”316 In January 2021, the U.S. Department of State declared the CCP to be committing acts of genocide against the Uyghur people and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. China’s response was vitriolic, with Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying accusing then Secretary of State Michael Pompeo of being a “notorious liar” and making himself into a “doomed clown.”317 Immediately after President Biden’s inauguration, the Chinese government issued sanctions targeting U.S. officials purported to have “seriously violated China’s sovereignty,” including former Secretary of State Pompeo and former National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien.318 Also in January, the State Department announced it would lift restrictions on official contacts between the United States and Taiwan.*319

**Tensions Continue in the Biden Administration**

Concerns over the growing national security threat from China remained after the U.S. presidential transition. Chinese officials initially hoped for a reset in U.S.-China relations, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang stating in January 2021 that bilateral ties had “come to a new crossroads” and that “a window of hope” was opening.320 Ministry of National Defense Spokesperson Senior Colonel Wu Qian similarly described the two countries’ military-to-military relationships as being “at a new historical starting point.”321

Chinese officials’ hopes were diminished within the first few months of the Biden Administration. In February 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense announced it would be conducting a four-month task force review to assess the department’s current policies and programs related to China.† In a March 2021 speech, Secretary of State Antony Blinken called the U.S. relationship with China “the

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*The State Department under the Biden Administration issued new guidelines for interactions between U.S. officials and their Taiwan counterparts in April 2021. The guidelines encourage working-level meetings with Taiwan counterparts in U.S. federal buildings and at Taiwan’s offices in the United States such as the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office. They also allow U.S. officials under certain conditions to attend events at the Twin Oaks estate in Washington, DC (the former residence of China’s ambassador to the United States between 1937 and 1979, retained by Taiwan after the U.S. change in diplomatic recognition). Meanwhile, the guidelines restore some restrictions that were lifted during the Trump Administration, such as restricting the display of the Republic of China flag during meetings between U.S. officials and Taiwan’s representatives while in the United States. U.S. Department of State, New Guidelines for U.S. Government Interactions with Taiwan Counterparts, April 9, 2021; Matthew Lee, “US Unveils New Rules for Government Contacts with Taiwan,” AP News, April 9, 2021; Robert Delaney, “US Announces New Policy Encouraging Government Ties with Taiwan Officials,” South China Morning Post, April 10, 2021; Nick Wadhams, “U.S. Ease Limits on Taiwan Contacts as China Tensions Climb,” Bloomberg, April 9, 2021; Demetri Sevastopulo, “US to Erase Restrictions on Meeting Taiwanese Officials,” Financial Times, April 9, 2021; Reuters and David Brunnstrom, “U.S. Issues Guidelines to Deepen Relations with Taiwan,” Reuters, April 9, 2021.

†Final recommendations from the task force were submitted to Secretary of Defense Austin in June 2021. It has since been reported that as result of the review, the Pentagon is considering creating a permanent naval task force in the Pacific to better address the threat from China in the region. Jim Garamone, “Biden Announces DOD China Task Force,” U.S. Department of Defense, February 10, 2021; U.S. Department of Defense, Secretary of Defense Directive on China Task Force Recommendations, June 9, 2021; Lara Seligman, “Pentagon Considering Permanent Naval Task Force to Counter China in the Pacific,” Politico, June 15, 2021.
Continuing tensions were also on display during the two countries’ initial high-level engagement in Anchorage, Alaska, later that month. The U.S. delegation criticized China’s use of economic coercion and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, top diplomat Yang Jiechi attacked the United States’ “Cold War mentality” and domestic political issues. Yang’s remarks, which ran for over fifteen minutes, led to a senior U.S. official stating that the Chinese delegation “seem[ed] to have arrived intent on grandstanding, focused on public theatrics and dramas over substance.”

Open displays of U.S.-China frictions continued after the Anchorage Summit. In March, the Biden Administration reaffirmed the previous administration’s May 2020 determination that Hong Kong is no longer autonomous and does not deserve special treatment from the U.S. government. The State Department’s annual human rights report reaffirmed that China’s actions against the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang constituted genocide. In April 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence announced it would create the Foreign Malign Influence Center to coordinate findings on foreign influence activities from countries, including China and Russia. Chinese leaders undermined their own efforts to improve bilateral military ties by denying Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s requests to meet with General Xu, his counterpart within the PLA hierarchy as executive vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. Pentagon officials in the Biden Administration and the PLA did not hold official talks until August 2021, when Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase spoke with PLA Major General Huang Xueping using the U.S.-PRC Defense Telephone Link.

In June 2021, the U.S. Senate’s passage of the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act prompted the Chinese Foreign Ministry to retort that the bill “distorts facts and slanders China’s development path and its domestic and foreign policies.” Prior to Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman’s July 2021 meeting with Chinese officials in Tianjin, Foreign Minister Wang warned that the Chinese government would give the United States a “tutorial” on how to treat China equitably. In a move reminiscent of Beijing’s imposi-
tions on Australia in late 2020, Chinese interlocutors proceeded to issue twin lists of demands during the meeting, including for the United States to lift visa restrictions for Chinese students and sanctions on CCP officials.\textsuperscript{332}

In September 2021, following Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou’s admission of wrongdoing in U.S. court and permission to return to China, Beijing immediately released Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, whom it had detained shortly after Ms. Meng’s arrest in 2018 and imprisoned for over 1,000 days.\textsuperscript{333} Beijing also released U.S. citizens Victor and Cynthia Liu, whom it had prevented from leaving China for over three years.\textsuperscript{334} While the Chinese government had previously claimed there was no link between Ms. Meng’s arrest and its detention of Canadian citizens or use of exit bans against U.S. citizens, Beijing’s actions clearly demonstrated this linkage and its willingness to use hostage diplomacy against the United States.
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