

CHAPTER 3

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

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

Key Findings

- In 2020, China sought to project an image of confidence and increased efforts to portray itself as a global leader superior to the United States even as it faced an increasing array of challenges at home and abroad. Meanwhile, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders took new steps to silence criticism of the Party and demand praise for its actions both among the Chinese populace and in foreign countries.
- General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping continued to emphasize the military dimension of U.S.-China competition, instructing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) for a second year to prepare for a potential military conflict with a "powerful enemy adversary"—a phrase used by the CCP to refer to the United States. The PLA commissioned its first indigenously produced aircraft carrier and the first of a new class of advanced, large displacement destroyers while continuing to struggle with persistent weaknesses in its training and the limited command capabilities of its officer corps.
- The CCP grew more openly confrontational toward the United States and key U.S. allies and partners as Beijing increasingly demonstrated its disregard for international rules, norms, and criticism of its actions. This aggressive approach was typified by Beijing's growing use of economic coercion against countries that took actions Beijing perceived as contrary to its interests.
- Beijing ramped up its multiyear coercion campaign against its neighbors, provoking military or paramilitary standoffs with countries from Japan to India and much of Southeast Asia. Shortly after China's defense minister urged Beijing to use military force to stabilize its periphery, a violent clash on the China-India border in June led to the first loss of life between the two countries since 1975.
- The CCP combined its aggressive actions beyond China's borders with increasing domestic repression. Beijing implemented a draconian security law that ended the political freedoms it had pledged to guarantee to Hong Kong, while new evidence emerged of the CCP's campaign of cultural genocide against the

millions of Uyghurs and Tibetans living under its rule. Concern about its abusive treatment of ethnic Mongolians is also rising.

- The U.S.-China relationship grew increasingly confrontational in 2020 as both governments characterized the other in sharply adversarial terms and unfavorable views toward China among the U.S. public reached a new historic high. The United States took significant new steps to curtail bilateral economic, scientific, and educational exchanges.
- The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic from Wuhan across China and beyond its borders revealed a range of systemic flaws in the Chinese governance system. Government authorities' active suppression of information, an overriding emphasis on secrecy and political image, and bureaucrat-ic paralysis combined to severely delay any meaningful policy response. Evidence also emerged that Beijing's official numbers dramatically underreported actual cases.

Introduction

In 2020, Beijing escalated its aggressive pursuit of global leadership status even as it faced a dizzying array of challenges at home and abroad. In a year marked by several critical political, economic, and military milestones, the CCP instead was forced to confront the massive global fallout resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China. Rather than emerge chastened from its culpability in the outbreak and spread of the pandemic, Beijing lashed out at its critics, launching a disinformation campaign regarding the virus' origins and casting itself as the country best fit to lead the world from the economic devastation left in the pandemic's wake.

As the world's attention was focused on the pandemic, Beijing ramped up military intimidation of its neighbors while levying economic punishment against countries that criticized its behavior. In a move that sent shockwaves around the region and beyond, Beijing implemented a draconian national security law in Hong Kong terminating the political and security principles of the "one country, two systems" framework that had guided its relationships with Hong Kong and Taiwan. In so doing, Beijing demonstrated its disregard for its international commitments and the demands of the historic prodemocracy protest movement ongoing in Hong Kong, while further damaging its ties to Taiwan. New details continued to emerge regarding the CCP's campaign of forced sterilization, intrusive surveillance, imprisonment, and cultural devastation of China's Uyghur minority population. Some experts argued the CCP's actions and policies in Xinjiang fit the legal definition of genocide.¹ Abuses against China's Tibetan and Mongolian minorities also continued to mount.

Meanwhile, China provoked confrontations with countries around its periphery, including a violent incident on the China-India border that resulted in the first fatal exchange between the two countries in 45 years. Tensions with the United States escalated further as Beijing engaged in rare *ad hominem* attacks against U.S. leaders and Washington took steps to curtail bilateral economic, scientific, and educational ties. If 2019 marked the end of any expectation that WTO accession and inclusion in the global institutional order would

moderate the CCP's authoritarian politics and liberalize its economy, then 2020 revealed Beijing's global ambition to imprint international institutions and influence regions with the CCP's agenda. The CCP under General Secretary Xi has defined a more confrontational relationship with the United States than at any time since the beginning of U.S.-China détente nearly half a century ago.

This section examines the key developments in China's political decision-making, military posture, and foreign relations in 2020. It begins by examining Beijing's assessment of its security environment as well as the effects on its external behavior of its sweeping actions to stamp out dissent and mobilize domestic nationalist fervor. It then assesses China's progress and continued shortfalls in building the PLA into a combat-ready, "world class" military before characterizing the drivers and consequences of Beijing's increasingly aggressive foreign policy. The section concludes with an examination of actions taken by Washington and Beijing reflecting their increasingly public recognition of their divergent national interests. This section is based on Commission hearings and briefings, discussions with outside experts, and open source research and analysis.

China's Domestic Politics

The year 2020 was significant for the CCP as it prepared for a series of highly consequential political, economic, and military milestones. Most importantly, 2020 was to be a critical year of achievements leading up to the celebration in 2021 of the CCP's "First Centennial" when it would mark 100 years since the founding of the Party in 1921. The Party was also preparing for its 20th National Congress, scheduled to be held in the fall of 2022, which some analysts assess will witness Xi Jinping's reappointment for an unprecedented third full term* as CCP General Secretary and the promotion of a new slate of senior CCP leaders.² According to testimony from Andrew Scobell, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, China's increased repression at home and confrontational behavior abroad throughout 2020 would likely set a pattern for China's behavior beyond 2020.³ By unambiguously signaling to potential domestic and foreign adversaries that the CCP would "not tolerate any attempts to undermine the festivities," he argued, Chinese leaders would "prepare the way for smooth sailing in 2021 and 2022."⁴

*Beginning in 1982, the People's Republic of China constitution included a provision limiting the office of the head of state (literally "state chairman," which the CCP translates into English as "president"), now held by Xi Jinping, to a maximum of two consecutive five-year terms. The limit was introduced under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and intended to prevent a return to the model of lifetime tenure that had existed under Mao Zedong. On March 11, 2018, China's National People's Congress passed an amendment to the constitution repealing the term limit, and on March 17, 2018, it unanimously approved Xi Jinping's reappointment as head of state with no limit on the number of terms he could serve. This change brought the position of head of state into line with China's two other top leadership positions, general secretary of the CCP and chairman of the Central Military Commission, neither of which is subject to a term limit. It also indicated Xi's possible intention to retain his role as CCP general secretary in 2022. Mao Zedong did not face limits on his tenure as the CCP's top leader, but after his death in 1976, no CCP leader has served as general secretary for three full terms. Encyclopedia Britannica, "Mao Zedong," September 5, 2020; Encyclopedia Britannica, "Deng Xiaoping," August 18, 2020; Christopher Bodeen, "Xi Jinping Reappointed China's President with No Term Limits," *Associated Press*, March 17, 2018; James Doubek, "China Removes Presidential Term Limits, Enabling Xi Jinping To Rule Indefinitely," *NPR*, March 11, 2020; Chris Buckley and Adam Wu, "Ending Term Limits for China's Xi Is a Big Deal. Here's Why," *New York Times*, March 10, 2018; *Xinhua*, "Xinhua Online Commentary: 'Trinity' Leadership System is a Successful Experience (新华网评: '三位一体' 领导体制是成功经验)," March 1, 2018; Encyclopedia Britannica, "Chinese Communist Party," July 18, 2016.

In 2020, the CCP had pledged it would realize the attainment of a “moderately prosperous society,” a decades-old development milestone comparable to the rise of the middle class.⁵ This prosperity, in turn, provided the foundation for a social compact with the Chinese public in which the CCP claimed legitimacy for its authoritarian, state-managed rule. China was also meant to conclude its 13th Five-Year Plan, achieve victory over extreme poverty, and complete two major military milestones, defined loosely as achieving the general mechanization and reorganization of its armed forces.⁶ More symbolically, 2020 signaled the original end date of China’s “period of strategic opportunity.” This formulation, first proposed by former CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin in 2002, exhorted China to rapidly develop its economy, political standing, and military power while taking advantage of a positive and improving domestic and international environment.*⁷

The CCP’s interest in achieving these milestones was magnified by the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan in late 2019 and its spread throughout China in 2020. Moreover, the global blowback against Beijing as COVID-19 spread beyond China’s borders and triggered a global pandemic contributed to the CCP’s worsening outlook on its security environment. In a series of speeches at the annual meetings of China’s National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, both held in May 2020, Chinese leaders registered alarm over their assessment of the country’s worsening security environment. In his annual report to the National People’s Congress, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang warned China should expect to face unprecedented challenges “at present and for some time to come.”⁸

At the same conference, State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe accused the United States of intensifying its “suppression and containment” of China since the COVID-19 outbreak, warning that U.S.-China “strategic confrontation [had] entered a period of high risk.”⁹ In early April, according to Reuters, a report produced by a think tank affiliated with China’s Ministry of State Security and shown to top Chinese leaders warned that global anti-China sentiment, led by the United States, was at its highest level since 1989. The report further judged this backlash could increase resistance to China’s global economic aims, such as its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and even lead to a worst-case scenario of armed confrontation between Washington and Beijing.¹⁰ †

These assessments added to top leaders’ pessimistic outlook on China’s external security environment prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. In the official report from the fourth plenum of the CCP’s 19th Party Congress held in late October 2019, the CCP judged that

*In a speech at the CCP’s 16th National Congress in 2002, Jiang noted, “An overview of the situation shows that for our country, the first two decades of the 21st century are a period of important strategic opportunities, which we must seize tightly and which offers bright prospects.” In late July 2020, a Politburo meeting readout announced that China would remain in a period of strategic opportunity for some time into the future but that it would face unspecified “new opportunities and challenges.” Jiang Zemin, “Build a Well-Off Society in an All-Round Way and Create a New Situation in Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, November 8, 2002; *Xinhua*, “CPC Leaders Analyze Economy, to Convene Central Committee Plenum in October,” July 30, 2020.

†It was unclear, based on Reuters’ accounting of the report, whether Beijing or Washington would initiate such a confrontation. For more, see Reuters, “Exclusive: Internal Chinese Report Warns Beijing Faces Tiananmen-Like Global Backlash over Virus,” May 4, 2020.

the risks and challenges it faced both at home and abroad were “clearly increasing,” requiring Beijing to intensify its “strategic determination” in achieving its domestic and international goals.¹¹ At an annual diplomatic forum in December 2019, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi described 2019 as a year of growing chaos and intensifying “great power [geopolitical] games.”¹² He declared that U.S.-China relations faced challenges unseen since the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1979 while decrying purported U.S. efforts to “needlessly limit and suppress” bilateral economic and science and technology exchanges and internationally vilify China’s governance system.¹³

In remarks and speeches published over the past year, General Secretary Xi also emphasized the CCP’s concerns over its security environment. In November 2019, following a common practice used by CCP leadership to emphasize key areas of national policy, the influential Party journal *Qiushi* (*Seeking Truth*) reprinted a 2018 speech by General Secretary Xi highlighting the bright prospects for the CCP’s international influence as well as the dangers posed to its rule by China’s increasingly challenging external environment and insufficient political determination at home. In the face of “major” and “strategic” problems affecting China’s modernization drive, General Secretary Xi called on CCP cadres to deepen their belief in the Party’s mission and purpose, without which the CCP might “waver... at the first sign of disturbance or trouble.”¹⁴ He repeated similar themes in an address to economists at the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in May 2020, noting China was facing “rising geopolitical risks” amid a “more unstable and uncertain world.”¹⁵

Ambitions for Global Leadership Undaunted

Despite the CCP’s concerns about risk, it remained undaunted in its efforts to be viewed at home and abroad as a global leader worthy of emulation and deference. In his speech reprinted by *Qiushi* in November, General Secretary Xi argued the success of Beijing’s model of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” had significantly brightened the prospects for the global socialist movement following the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Continuing this theme, he exhorted CCP cadres to remember their duty to “liberate all of humanity” and serve as the “gravediggers of capitalism.”¹⁷ In his December 2019 speech at the annual forum on Chinese diplomacy, Foreign Minister Wang declared that Beijing must propagate China’s “way of governance” around the globe to “guide” the world in its “thinking” on historical progress.¹⁸ He asserted Beijing would make new efforts to increase China’s international influence and create a global “community of common human destiny,” invoking the CCP’s term for a new, Sinocentric world order.¹⁹ (For more on Beijing’s ambitions to revise the global order, see Chapter 1, Section 2, “The China Model: Return of the Middle Kingdom.”)

The CCP continued its efforts to promote its governance system as a successful model for other countries to follow amid the global spread of COVID-19. Meanwhile, Beijing launched a wide-ranging disinformation campaign seeking to blame the United States and others for originating the virus while distracting global attention

from its actual origins in Wuhan. In March, Xinhua published an article describing support from foreign leaders during the pandemic as proof that “the concept of a community of common human destiny [had] penetrated deeply into the hearts of the people” around the world.²⁰ In a speech in Malaysia in April, Foreign Minister Wang continued on this theme, crediting the CCP’s leadership for “fully [bringing] to bear the strengths of [its] system” in responding to the outbreak.²¹ He pledged that China would create a “Health Silk Road” by increasing health cooperation with countries participating in Beijing’s BRI and described the pandemic as a moment when humankind wrote “a new chapter” in the construction of a “community of common human destiny.”²²

New Party Concerns about Legitimacy

Within China, the COVID-19 outbreak highlighted numerous deep-seated weaknesses in China’s rigid governance system, placing new pressure on the CCP’s governing legitimacy. Government authorities’ active suppression of information, an overriding emphasis on secrecy and political image, and bureaucratic paralysis produced by Beijing’s centralization of key governance functions combined to impede initial public identification of the virus and severely delay any meaningful policy response. Labs attempting to release genetic information on the virus, medical professionals who attempted to raise the alarm, and members of the general public who sought to share information were all silenced.²³ Meanwhile, local officials ignored public health precautions during political meetings and misled central authorities on the severity of the outbreak while authorities in Beijing withheld crucial information from the World Health Organization (WHO).²⁴ The central government also did not mobilize to confront the threat until late January, about a month after the first identification of the virus, ultimately enabling the spread of a pandemic around the world.²⁵

As the year progressed, weaknesses in the political system continued to cause trouble and undermine the CCP’s desire for a clear victory in the “People’s War” against the virus. Authorities continued to underreport cases, and throughout the spring and summer, unexpected outbreaks appeared in Beijing, Xinjiang, China’s northeast, and elsewhere that local authorities struggled to control.²⁶ As one official from China’s southern Guangdong Province explained in May, “Local authorities do not have the expertise to fight the epidemic... we just meet to learn from Xi Jinping’s speeches...The central government did not give us what we really need for our work.”²⁷ (For more information on Beijing’s domestic response to COVID-19, see Chapter 2, Section 3, “U.S.-China Links in Healthcare and Biotechnology.”)

Beijing’s Doctored Numbers

Independent estimates of the outbreak in China throughout the pandemic provide significant reason to doubt Beijing’s official reported number of cases and deaths from COVID-19. The Imperial College in London estimated that while the Wuhan Health Commission reported only 45 cases by January 18, about 1,723 people

Beijing's Doctored Numbers—Continued

in the city had already experienced onset symptoms by January 12.²⁸ This early disparity in numbers likely widened significantly with a wave of outbound travel from Wuhan prior to the Spring Festival holiday that began on January 25. In preparation for the Spring Festival, about 415 million people travel throughout China to visit family in other parts of the country, making it the largest human migration on the planet.²⁹ An April estimate from the American Enterprise Institute, which took into account Spring Festival travel from Wuhan, placed the number of cases outside of Hubei Province at a staggering 2.9 million*—more than an order of magnitude above the official nationwide total of 82,276—in addition to the cases from the epicenter in Hubei.³⁰ Between March and July, as case totals grew exponentially in numerous countries around the globe, China's official number inched upward by only about 1,220 per month, reaching an official nationwide total of 84,816 on July 1.³¹

Further anecdotal evidence comes from situations observed on the ground in Wuhan. According to reports from Wuhan residents in late March, when the official death toll in the city was under 3,000 people, the city's seven crematoria nonetheless operated almost around the clock with additional staff sent from around China, giving them the combined capacity to cremate about 2,000 bodies every day.³² Reporting by Caixin from around this same time reveals that when the total government figure was 2,548 deaths in all of Wuhan, a single funeral home received deliveries of about 2,500 cremation urns on two consecutive days.³³

Signs of Discontent over CCP's Political System

New signs of popular discontent with the regime emerged in the fallout from the COVID-19 crisis. After news broke in early February of the death of whistleblower doctor Li Wenliang, millions of Chinese citizens tried to bypass censors to post the hashtag #WeWantFreedomOfSpeech.³⁴ Some echoed language used by Hong Kong's prodemocracy protest movement by creating a list of "five demands,"† including that the Chinese government formally apologize to Li and legally enforce freedom of speech, while others compared the rallying effect of Li's death to the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising. Within 24 hours of Li's death, his name was the most heavily censored term on Weibo, China's version of Twitter.³⁵

Some Chinese citizens also drew parallels between how their government handled the COVID-19 outbreak and the Soviet Union's mismanagement of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, even arguing the

*Derek Scissors at the American Enterprise Institute began with Chinese state media estimates for the number of people who flew from Wuhan to cities outside of Hubei for the Spring Festival, then applied a low estimated infection rate of 2.3 percent and a low estimate of the number of days the virus could have circulated from infected Wuhan residents before meaningful containment measures were put in place outside of Hubei. After scaling up the result to account for China's population size, he obtained a total estimate of 2.9 million cases outside of Hubei Province as of April 2020. Derek Scissors, "Estimating the True Number of China's COVID-19 Cases," *American Enterprise Institute*, April 7, 2020, 1.

†For more on the demands of the Hong Kong prodemocracy movement, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2019 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2019, 481–520.

Wuhan government made greater efforts to suppress information than Soviet authorities did.³⁶ Many channeled their frustrations through references to HBO's 2019 hit show *Chernobyl*. One Weibo user urged Chinese citizens to learn from the show, arguing, "The things that can protect [Chinese people] are not nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers, or things that can land on the moon. Things that protect us are free flow of information and news, and judicial independence."³⁷ Chinese government censors quickly restricted online access to the show.³⁸

Pointed criticism of Beijing's response to the virus also came from prominent dissidents and members of the CCP elite. The most scathing criticism came from Ren Zhiqiang, an outspoken property tycoon and Party member once with deep ties to the upper echelons of the CCP, including Vice President Wang Qishan and top trade negotiator Liu He.³⁹ In an essay circulated among elite circles in China and abroad, while not explicitly naming General Secretary Xi, Mr. Ren argued the actions of a power-hungry "clown" had exacerbated the pandemic.⁴⁰ "I see not an emperor standing there exhibiting his 'new clothes,'" he wrote, "but a clown who stripped naked and insisted on continuing to be an emperor."⁴¹ Mr. Ren disappeared shortly after his essay was circulated on the internet. On July 23, the CCP announced Mr. Ren's expulsion from the Party and seizure of his assets for "serious violations of discipline and law," and in mid-September a Beijing court sentenced him to 18 years in prison for corruption.⁴²

Also in July, Xu Zhangrun, a law professor at Tsinghua University, was arrested after publishing an essay earlier in the year in which he claimed the pandemic had "revealed the rotten core of Chinese governance" and called for an open investigation into the CCP's coverup of the outbreak.⁴³ Mr. Xu, who was already under house arrest at the time of his detention, was reportedly held for six days and fired from his position at Tsinghua University.⁴⁴ In May, retired Central Party School professor Cai Xia lambasted General Secretary Xi in an online speech for transforming the CCP into a "political zombie" and its 90 million members into "slaves."⁴⁵ She concluded the country must overthrow General Secretary Xi and abandon the CCP's political system, which she judged was beyond repair, to avoid being led down a "dead end to be buried."⁴⁶ In August, the CCP formally expelled Ms. Cai from the Party and terminated her retirement benefits.⁴⁷ The former Party professor was accused of "maliciously smear[ing] the image of the party and state leader" and making speeches of an "extraordinarily execrable nature."⁴⁸ Ms. Cai is currently in the United States, where she has lived since 2019.⁴⁹

Continuing Concerns over Governance Shortfalls

The unsteady performance of the CCP's governance system amid the COVID-19 outbreak occurred against the backdrop of CCP lead-

* In a possible rejoinder to Ms. Cai's criticism, He Yiting, executive vice president of the Central Party School, penned a commentary published on the front page of *Study Times*, the official newspaper of the school, praising General Secretary Xi and claiming the present state of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" had "written the most wonderful chapter of world socialism in 500 years." William Zheng, "China's Socialism Beats Capitalism, Communist Party Ideology Veteran Says in 'Bid to Shore Up Support,'" *South China Morning Post*, June 16, 2020.

ers' continuing concerns over endemic corruption and bureaucratic ineptitude. In a potential reference to the failures of local government officials to prevent and contain the spread of the virus, in his May report to the National People's Congress Premier Li used new language to criticize government incompetence, decrying officials who "shirk their duties or are incapable of fulfilling them."⁵⁰ He further noted the serious challenges to Chinese governance from "pointless formalities and bureaucracy."⁵¹ In other places, Premier Li repeated nearly verbatim language from his addresses to previous years' sessions of the assembly, pledging to release low-level officials from the "fetters of pointless formalities" while taking "strong steps to address the practice of... bureaucracy, hedonism, and extravagance."⁵²

Other authoritative warnings over governance shortcomings suggested previous pledges by Beijing to eradicate CCP corruption and improve governance practices had fallen short. In October 2019, the official report from the 19th Party Congress Fourth Plenum restated earlier promises to build a Party that "dares not, cannot, and does not want to be corrupt."[†]⁵³ That same month, *Qiushi* published a speech by General Secretary Xi from January 2018 condemning a litany of corrupt behaviors and governing incompetence among CCP officials.⁵⁴ Comparing cadre behavior to the "extreme extravagance" and "shameless debauchery" of officials responsible for the fall of successive imperial Chinese dynasties, he warned that the CCP could meet a similar end if it did not remediate its governance shortfalls.⁵⁵

Shoring Up Ideology in Defense of the Party

Facing growing opposition abroad and fallout from the virus at home, the CCP emphasized the need for martial fervor on the battleground of ideas. Showing further signs of an emerging cult of personality, the *People's Daily* in May 2020 referred to General Secretary Xi as "Supreme Commander," granting him the third of Mao Zedong's four most important titles at the height of the latter's power.[‡]⁵⁶ In September, the CCP officially designated Xi as the "core" of the Party leadership in an unusual rules change, formalizing his leadership role within the Party to a degree observers described as unprecedented and as further enabling him to hold power indefinitely.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, the CCP increasingly stressed the importance of "Party-building"[§] as General Secretary Xi urged cadres in a speech pub-

^{*}This was not the first high-level criticism of local officials' incompetence. In his report to the 19th Party Congress in 2017, General Secretary Xi warned that the CCP must "fully recognize the intensity and severity of the dangers of a lack of drive, incompetence, disengagement from the people, inaction, and corruption" among Party cadres. Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, October 18, 2017.

[†]Premier Li notably used this phrase in his 2019 address to the National People's Congress.

[‡]The other three of Mao Zedong's titles were variations of "Helmsman," "Leader," and "Teacher." Of the four, General Secretary Xi has yet to be called only "Teacher." Chinese state media first gave Xi the titles "Leader" and "Helmsman" in January 2018 and March 2018, respectively. Chris Buckley, "China's New 'Helmsman' Offers a Strident Nationalist Message," *New York Times*, March 20, 2018; Bill Bishop, "'人民领袖' -- The People's 'Leader' Xi Jinping Gets a New Propaganda Title," *Sinocism*, February 11, 2018; Ma Baofeng, "Chairman Mao Zedong's Diplomatic Style (2) A Conversation on Etiquette (139)" (毛泽东主席的外交风度(二) (礼仪漫谈(139))), *People's Daily*, January 18, 2014. Translation.

[§]Party building, along with armed struggle and United Front work, is one of the three "magic weapons" Mao Zedong described as tools to "storm and shatter" the positions of the Party's ene-

lished in November 2019 to intensify their “theoretical armaments” and maintain faith in the CCP, seeking to wield ideological fervor and conviction in Marxism as a weapon for the Party.⁵⁸ In November 2019, *Qiushi* published General Secretary Xi’s speech from that July’s first-ever CCP Central Committee conference on Party-building work in central Party and state organs.⁵⁹ In his speech, he declared the Party was “armed with Marxism” and must “ensure the whole Party is of one mind and walking in lockstep.”⁶⁰ In his speech published by *Qiushi* in October 2019, General Secretary Xi drew parallels between CCP cadres’ lack of ideological conviction and the loss of belief among officials in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries prior to the Soviet Union’s collapse and the fall from power of Communist parties in those countries.⁶¹ To avoid a similar outcome, he urged cadres to “forge bodies of unbreakable adamantite and arm their minds with the scientific theory” of Marxism.⁶²

China’s neighborhood committees reemerged as a powerful tool of surveillance over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Known popularly as “KGB with tiny feet” in the 1990s due to their reputation for spying on residents, these committees are the “lowest level of [civil affairs] government,” according to Chinese state media, and have existed in all Chinese cities since the late 1980s.⁶³ Foreign media and Chinese state media reported that the monitoring and surveillance by committee staff, who are mostly CCP members, assisted in epidemic prevention at the grassroots level.⁶⁴ Other observers noted more negative consequences of the committee’s activities, such as a competition between localities to implement the most radical quarantine measures.⁶⁵ Even after the initial lockdowns ended, some committees maintained their increased surveillance measures against local residents.⁶⁶

The CCP also took new steps to undermine academic independence and issued new ideological curriculum guidelines, deepening its nationwide campaign to ensure the fealty of Chinese university faculty.⁶⁷ In December 2019, Fudan University in Shanghai replaced references to academic independence and freedom of thought in its charter with language about “serving the [CCP’s] governance,” while Nanjing and Shaanxi universities made similar changes.⁶⁸ Fudan students protesting the changes were quickly censored.⁶⁹ The CCP also took new steps to exert control over teaching content.⁷⁰ In May, the Ministry of Education issued new ideological and political guidelines emphasizing that university curricula must incorporate “Xi Jinping Thought” and focus on “strengthening students’ ideological convictions, with love for the Party, country, socialism, people, and collective as the main thread.”⁷¹

mies. CCP Central Organization Department, *Party-Building Work in Relevant Organs: What It Is, What It Does, and How to Do It* (机关党建工作：是什么、干什么、怎么干), November 26, 2019. Translation.

*Strictness of monitoring varied, but methods included electronic monitoring of location data, manually collecting detailed travel history, constantly checking those entering or exiting communities for travel permits, closely tracking residents’ health, and assigning someone to accompany residents on trips to cemeteries. For more, see Brenda Goh, “Lockdown Lifted, Wuhan’s Residence Committees Keep Watch,” *Reuters*, April 16, 2020; Gerry Shih, “Locked Down in Beijing, I Watched China Beat Back the Coronavirus,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2020; Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, “To Tame Coronavirus, Mao-Style Social Control Blankets China,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2020.

Global Spread of Chinese Surveillance and Censorship

Beijing's surveillance and censorship extended beyond its borders as popular social media programs became complicit in censorship both within and outside China. In June 2020, the video conferencing platform Zoom, which relies heavily on staff and operations based in China,* shut down several online events commemorating the Tiananmen Square massacre and temporarily suspended the accounts of several U.S.- and Hong Kong-based activists after Beijing informed Zoom that the events violated Chinese law.⁷² In response to media criticism of its actions, the company indicated it would continue to censor users inside China while pledging not to let future requests by Beijing affect users based outside of China.⁷³

In May, Toronto-based CitizenLab reported that WeChat, the omnipresent social media app owned by Tencent, automatically analyzed content sent between accounts registered on non-Chinese telecommunications carriers.† According to CitizenLab, the program then added any sensitive content to an internal blacklist, resulting in faster censorship of that same content when sent between accounts registered on Chinese telecommunications carriers.⁷⁴ Earlier, in October 2019, a German cybersecurity firm revealed the CCP-mandated ideological indoctrination app “Study Xi, Strong Country” gave Chinese authorities “superuser” access to all content on the more than 100 million Android devices carrying the program.‡⁷⁵

New reports also revealed Beijing was using genetic information and electronic surveillance tools to monitor and control ethnic Uyghurs, including in foreign countries, for longer than previously known. In December 2019, the New York Times reported the Chinese government was using genetic data, likely collected without consent, to generate facial images to enhance racial profiling of Uyghurs.⁷⁶ To generate these images, authorities leveraged genetic data from all Xinjiang residents between the ages of 12 and 65, which according to Human Rights Watch had been collected since 2017 under the guise of a public health program.⁷⁷ China's Ministry of Public Security oversees some of this research, which relies in part on funding from European institutions and technology designed in the United States.⁷⁸

This DNA database is no longer being used to track only Uyghurs, however. According to June 2020 analysis by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, in 2017 China began using tens of millions of samples from males all over China to build “the world's largest police-run DNA database” in violation of Chinese law and international norms.⁷⁹ In another revelation of the sophistication and ex-

*Zoom employs at least 500 staff based in mainland China research and development centers, or approximately 30 percent of its total staff and 70 percent of its staff based outside the United States. The program has routed data through servers in China in the past. Eugene Kim, “Zoom, One of the Most Anticipated Tech IPOs of the Year, Has One Key Profit Driver: Engineers in China,” *CNBC*, March 26, 2019; Jordan Novet, “Nancy Pelosi Called Zoom ‘A Chinese Entity,’ but It’s an American Company with an American CEO,” April 15, 2020.

†As of May 2020, WeChat had 1.2 billion active monthly users worldwide, with most of them in China. Masha Borak, “WeChat Now Has over 1.2 Billion Users Worldwide,” *South China Morning Post*, May 14, 2020.

‡Through this app, Party members and state employees are required to engage in daily study of General Secretary Xi's speeches and other CCP ideological content. For more information, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2019 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2019, 87.

tent of Beijing's surveillance campaign, in July 2020 mobile security firm Lookout found the Chinese government had used mobile phone malware to spy on Uyghurs as they fled to up to 15 countries since at least 2013, far earlier and at a greater scale than was previously known.⁸⁰

General Secretary Xi Declares the “Organs of Dictatorship” Shall Show “Absolutely No Mercy”

In late 2019, leaked CCP documents concerning the mass concentration of Uyghurs in prison camps in China's western Xinjiang region confirmed top CCP leaders' approval and active encouragement of the program. In November, the New York Times published a trove of internal Party documents revealing details about the camps, including General Secretary Xi's personal role in approving the program and Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo's purges of cadres who questioned or hesitated in implementing the campaign.⁸¹ When the campaign began in 2014, according to the documents, General Secretary Xi called on Party officials to use the “organs of dictatorship” to round up members of the Uyghur population and show “absolutely no mercy” toward suspected militants, regardless of internal hesitation or external criticism of the program.⁸²

According to a June 2020 Associated Press report, having too many children is a major reason Uyghur women are sent to the camps, and Chinese officials systematically subject them to forced sterilization, abortion, and contraception use.⁸³ For example, sterilizations in Xinjiang quintupled from below 50 per 100,000 people in 2016 to almost 250 per 100,000 in 2018, compared to a slight decrease for all of China over the same time period.⁸⁴ Some experts argue these forced sterilizations fit the international legal definition of genocide since they aim to ultimately reduce the Uyghur population by preventing births.⁸⁵ In September 2020, Chinese authorities confirmed such a reduction in births among Uyghurs, acknowledging to CNN that births in Xinjiang dropped by a third in 2018 compared to 2017, although it denied the use of forced sterilization.⁸⁶

Later in November, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists published another set of internal Chinese cables describing the pervasive surveillance in Xinjiang and the prison camps' integration into a sprawling state-sponsored forced labor network.⁸⁷ One manual described “general indoctrination” as a central goal of the repression campaign and detailed techniques for forced indoctrination, maintenance of secrecy, and escape prevention.⁸⁸ Among the most concerning of the revelations was Chinese Embassy and consular staff's direct involvement in facilitating the dragnet's detention of Uyghurs, including the intentional targeting of Uyghurs who were citizens of other countries.⁸⁹ Chinese consular staff helped collect information on overseas Uyghurs for the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, the computer program used by China's security services as the “cybernetic brain” supporting the Xinjiang surveillance state. This system then uses the information, including that gathered by consular staff on foreign citizens, to generate lists of targets to be further investigated in China or immediately detained upon entering China.⁹⁰

Repression of Ethnic Minorities Escalates in Tibet and Inner Mongolia

Meanwhile, the CCP increased its repression in China's other frontier regions, escalating its attacks on ethnic minorities in Tibet and Inner Mongolia to accelerate the erosion of the unique culture and identity of these groups the Party has long perceived as threats to its rule. In September, Reuters reported that authorities in Tibet had implemented quotas for the mass transfer of Tibetans from rural areas into recently built military-style training centers where they are forced into manual labor in Tibet and other parts of China.⁹¹ The program, which mirrors the Chinese government's attempts in Xinjiang to force Uyghurs into manual labor, is described by independent researcher Adrian Zenz as a "coercive lifestyle change" and "the most clear and targeted attack on traditional Tibetan livelihoods" since the Cultural Revolution.*⁹² Earlier, in June, the Chinese government expanded its campaign to "wear away and destroy" ethnic Tibetans' identity by adding the destruction of prayer flags across ethnic Tibetan areas in western China to its restrictions on Tibetan-language education and other repressive policies.⁹³

In Inner Mongolia, after Chinese authorities announced in August that nearly all primary school classes would be taught in Mandarin instead of Mongolian, around 300,000 ethnic Mongolian students protested the policy change by refusing to attend fall semester classes, with boycotts continuing through at least mid-September.⁹⁴ Several ethnic Mongolians, including a government administrator, committed suicide in protest, while many others engaged in acts of civil disobedience, with parents displaying placards claiming that learning their native language was an "inalienable right" and students shouting, "Mongolian is our mother language! We are Mongolian until death!"⁹⁵ The CCP arrested hundreds of ethnic Mongolians in the region for resisting or failing to implement the directive, and by mid-September appeared to have crushed the majority of the protests.⁹⁶ Authorities threatened that those continuing the boycott would be denied bank loans for five years, lose access to government subsidies, and be placed on an "untrustworthy persons" list if they did not cease their protests.⁹⁷

Progress and Shortfalls in Building a World-Class Military

The PLA made steady progress toward becoming a world-class military in 2020, a year in which Beijing expected the force to "generally achieve mechanization" and complete the redesign of its military policy system.†⁹⁸ As it cut nonurgent government spending by 50 percent due to the economic impact of COVID-19, Beijing increased the PLA's official budget‡ by 6.6 percent while calling on

*During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards seeking to "eradicate [Tibet's] feudal culture" looted monasteries, destroyed religious artifacts and photographs of the Dalai Lama, and used "struggle sessions" to punish those who refused to denounce friends and relatives as reactionaries. Dan Southerland, "After 50 Years, Tibetans Recall the Cultural Revolution," *Radio Free Asia*, August 9, 2016.

†The "policy system" refers to the PLA's systems managing personnel, budget, salary, welfare, and procurement. See Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, *Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications*, National Defense University Press, 2017, 50.

‡China's overall military spending outstrips what its government reports in official defense spending. Official figures are plagued with inconsistent reporting and lack the transparency needed for verification. Independent analyses estimate that total Chinese military spending is consistently 30 percent to 70 percent higher than the official defense budget. See China Power

the force to be the “vanguard” combating the pandemic and to make greater efforts to overcome enduring shortfalls in its capabilities.⁹⁹

Growing Power Projection Capabilities

On January 2, General Secretary Xi issued the PLA’s annual training mobilization order, reemphasizing language from his 2019 order on preparing for a potential confrontation with the “powerful enemy adversary”—a phrase used to refer to the United States.¹⁰⁰ In a new addition, he also called on the PLA to “dare to prevail over all enemies,” potentially signaling heightened anticipation of a conflict with China’s neighboring countries.¹⁰¹ The 2020 order repeated several other themes found in the 2019 order, including emphasizing training in systems confrontation and joint and combined arms operations under hostile conditions.¹⁰²

The PLA Navy made demonstrable capital and training improvements toward these objectives and its goal of becoming a blue-water navy. It commissioned the first of an anticipated eight Type 055 (RENHAI) destroyers, a large displacement multirole surface combatant that boasts the PLA Navy’s most advanced stealth characteristics, weapons volume, and weapons range.¹⁰³ Tonnage and capability of the Type 055 exceed those of the U.S. Navy’s Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, itself already larger and more capable than ships previously designated as cruisers.^{*104} Other PLA Navy improvements highlighted new naval aviation capabilities, for example commissioning China’s first indigenously built aircraft carrier in December 2019 and deploying it in a series of increasingly complex exercises, including the first known simultaneous exercises for both of China’s aircraft carriers.¹⁰⁵ One such exercise featured PLA Navy aviators conducting tactically challenging aerial refueling between warplanes at night.¹⁰⁶

Additionally, the PLA Navy launched a second Type 075 (YUSHEN) amphibious assault ship, designed to be comparable to the U.S. Navy’s America-class assault carrier.¹⁰⁷ It also began procuring equipment for what is likely to be the next-generation Type 076 amphibious assault ship, which may introduce a catapult launch system for carrying jet aircraft.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the PLA Navy Marine Corps demonstrated measured success in its evolution into an expeditionary force by further improving its use of amphibious vehicles in island assaults.¹⁰⁹ In June, China successfully launched the final satellite in its Beidou network, improving the PLA’s ability to operate globally using an indigenous positioning, navigation, and timing system rather than relying on the U.S. Global Positioning System.¹¹⁰ (For more on PLA modernization, see Chapter 3, Section 2, “China’s Growing Power Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities.”)

Team, “What Does China Really Spend on Its Military?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*; Shaoguang Wang, “The Military Expenditure of China, 1989–98,” in *SIPRI Yearbook 1999: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security*, 1999, 334–349.

* Modern definitions for destroyers and cruisers—the latter of which are a class of naval combatants typically larger and more capable than destroyers and smaller only than aircraft carriers and battleships—have been inconsistent. The London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies is a representative example, classifying cruisers as warships displacing over 9,750 tons and destroyers as warships displacing between 4,500 and 9,749 tons. China’s Type 055 warship is expected to displace approximately 14,000 tons, and the U.S. Department of Defense classifies it as a cruiser. Nonetheless, the PLA classifies the Type 055 as a destroyer, following precedent set by the U.S. Navy’s 14,000-ton Zumwalt destroyers, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force’s 24,000-ton Izumo-class helicopter destroyers, and the Republic of Korea Navy’s 11,000-ton Sejong the Great-class destroyers. Keith Patton, “That’s a Destroyer?” *The Navalist*, April 10, 2017.

Continuing Systemic Weaknesses

Alongside its modernization and reorganization efforts, the PLA continued to address operational weaknesses stemming from its basic organization, training practices, and struggle to overcome corruption in its ranks. Early in the year, after many years of experimentation, the PLA Army transitioned its basic combat units from traditional single-arm or single-specialty combat units into combined arms battalions.¹¹¹ The PLA Army has yet to train a generation of officers prepared to lead these battalions. In December 2019, for instance, the *PLA Daily* reported that PLA battalions only recently added an adequate number of staff officers to support battalion commanders and that efficient command prior to this addition was “unimaginable.”¹¹² The article also lamented that some commanders neglected to employ supporting capabilities such as PLA Army aviation during training exercises due to their lack of experience in combined arms operations.¹¹³ Similarly, despite detailed policy prescriptions, key logistical issues for a blue-water navy, such as managing corrosion on equipment at sea, remained a significant challenge.¹¹⁴

PLA training proved another enduring weakness, as the force frequently approached drills by executing preset plans rather than responding to a developing situation.¹¹⁵ Over the past year, the PLA’s own analysis revealed much of its training to be unsuited for developing combat capabilities, criticizing them as “formalities” or “for show.”¹¹⁶ Some PLA officers complained training evaluations used inflated or ungermane metrics, while other officers exacerbated training challenges by exhibiting limited independent decision-making capabilities out of fear that poor results would draw punishment.¹¹⁷ In one typical example, the *PLA Daily* reported in February 2020 that a common reason for lack of initiative among the PLA officer corps was officers’ perception that “the more we do, the greater our chance of making mistakes.”¹¹⁸ In some cases, the PLA’s investigations into its capability shortfalls revealed that core competencies for modern warfare, such as PLA Air Force joint capabilities, were also developed unevenly. For example, a *PLA Daily* report in March described a joint exercise between over 100 elite PLA Army aviation and PLA Air Force troops that revealed ineffective command and limited jointness.¹¹⁹

Despite some apparent successes in the PLA’s anticorruption efforts, evidence of corruption continued to surface in the force.¹²⁰ In his role as chairman of the Central Military Commission, in November 2019 General Secretary Xi called for the cultivation of a “new type of military personnel who are competent, professional and possess both integrity and ability,” implying that many current or recent past PLA personnel lack these qualities.¹²¹ That same month, the Central Military Commission issued guidelines stressing the need to “purify” the PLA’s “political ecology” to eliminate the lingering influence of former top leaders arrested for corruption.¹²²

In January 2020, the Central Military Commission issued trial regulations on military supervision in a further effort to curb corruption, and in June the Politburo passed updated regulations governing CCP control over the PLA.¹²³ China’s Ministry of National Defense noted this was the “first time a comprehensive and

systematic regulation of Party building in the military was specifically made” and attributed the need for the regulations to “many new situations and new challenges” facing Party-army relations.¹²⁴ The admission of new challenges facing CCP control over the PLA suggested that significant issues over loyalty and corruption may persist in the force.

Several high-profile accusations of corruption within the PLA and China’s defense industrial base over the past year reflected the severity of this issue. In late 2019, two PLA generals and four civilian officials, including Strategic Support Force Deputy Commander Rao Kaixun, were removed from their posts due to “serious violations of discipline,” a common euphemism for corruption.¹²⁵ In May 2020, Hu Wenming, chairman of the PLA Navy’s leading shipbuilder China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation, was also arrested on charges of corruption.¹²⁶ The arrest of Hu, who oversaw China’s aircraft carrier program, was the latest among multiple corruption charges against high-ranking officials at the organization, including a discipline inspection team leader, a general manager, and two research directors.¹²⁷

Uncertain Progress and Chronic Delays toward 2020 Milestones

The PLA appeared to only partially achieve its major 2020 goals. The CCP set two key goals for the PLA to reach this year: a modernization goal to “basically achieve mechanization”* and a reorganization goal to redesign the PLA’s personnel, budget, and procurement systems.† On July 31, in a speech to the Politburo given one day before the 93rd anniversary of the PLA’s founding, General Secretary Xi declared that the PLA would achieve its 2020 goals.¹²⁸ This projection of confidence was echoed by PLA sources and state media reports.¹²⁹

Despite these claims, other evidence suggested the PLA would not in fact meet its 2020 reorganization goal. In a statement that undermined the claims of success by General Secretary Xi and others, on August 27, a spokesperson for China’s Ministry of National Defense admitted the PLA now anticipated completing its military policy system redesign in 2022, two years behind schedule.¹³⁰ As Joel Wuthnow, senior research fellow at the National Defense University, testified before the Commission, by its own timeline “the PLA has been consistently behind schedule over the last five years.”¹³¹ For example, “reforms to the military educational system, the People’s Armed Police, and the reserves were all to have taken place in 2016,

* General Secretary Xi laid out three steps for PLA modernization in his 2017 work report to the CCP’s 19th National Congress to be achieved in 2020, 2035, and 2049. The PLA’s 2020 goal was to “basically achieve mechanization, make major progress in informationization, and greatly improve its strategic capabilities.” The 2035 goal was to “basically complete the modernization of national defense and the military” and its 2049 goal was to “fully transform [the PLA] into world-class forces.” See Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Beijing, October 18, 2017, 48.

† In 2013, Chinese leaders declared their intention to reorganize the PLA to address enduring capability gaps. This reorganization would include efforts to “overhaul the military’s command structure, update its training and logistics systems, adjust the size and composition of the services, unveil new rules and regulations governing military personnel, and strengthen military-civil cooperation in technological development and other areas.” Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, “Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA,” in Phillip C. Saunders et al., ed., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, National Defense University Press, 2019, 2.

but major changes in those areas were not completed until June 2017, 2017–8, and 2020, respectively.”¹³²

Some evidence also cast doubt on General Secretary Xi’s claim regarding the PLA’s success in achieving its modernization goal. As recently as 2017, approximately half of the PLA Army’s infantry brigades were considered “motorized” and in need of significant modernization before meeting PLA requirements for mechanization.*¹³³ Furthermore, according to Dr. Wuthnow, the PLA continues to use a significant amount of outdated equipment across each of its services, with such equipment being particularly prevalent in the ground forces, including in units considered to be mechanized.¹³⁴ For instance, as of 2020, 40 percent of the PLA Army’s main battle tank force dates from the 1960s to the 1980s, with less than 4 percent produced within the last decade.¹³⁵ Reflecting the uneven progress toward meeting its 2020 goal, China’s defense white paper issued in 2019 stated that the PLA had “yet to complete the task of mechanization.”¹³⁶ In this context, General Secretary Xi’s claim of success may have relied on the caveat in the original 2020 goal language that mechanization was only to be “basically” achieved.

China’s New Diplomacy: “For Our Enemies, We Have Shotguns”

In 2020, China’s diplomatic corps continued to implement the more assertive vision for Beijing’s foreign relations General Secretary Xi called for in 2018.† Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s top diplomats used their platform to threaten foreign governments, businesses, private institutions, and elected leaders Beijing saw as opposed to the Chinese government’s interests.¹³⁷ In November 2019, Foreign Minister Wang emphasized his previous appeals to China’s diplomats to display a stronger “fighting spirit.”¹³⁸ In his December address on China’s diplomacy, he stated that Beijing would ensure its “bottom lines are never violated” while warning, “[China] will never accept unilateral sanctions or any acts of bullying.”¹³⁹ According to testimony before the Commission from Kerry Brown, professor of Chinese Studies at King’s College London, while the CCP’s strong nationalism is “great for domestic politics... and lies at the heart of the Xi leadership, in terms of [China’s] external messaging, it is deeply, and increasingly problematic.”¹⁴⁰

In one notable example of this approach, in November 2019, after the Swedish branch of an international free speech organization gave an award to a Swedish bookseller kidnapped by China in 2015 and Stockholm passed a law calling for a national security review of Huawei in Sweden’s 5G rollout, the response from China’s diplo-

* Official PLA sources describe modernization as a multi-stage process. “Motorization” describes the PLA’s transition toward employing motorized vehicles for equipment transportation and movement of infantry to and on the battlefield. Motorization effectively ended the PLA’s widespread use of foot marches and pack animals to move troops and equipment. This stage of modernization precedes “mechanization,” which is characterized by more heavily armed and armored vehicles that are typically tracked and include infantry fighting vehicles, tanks, and self-propelled artillery. These vehicles can both move troops to the battlefield and participate more directly in battlefield maneuver. Chinese state media declared the PLA fully motorized and partially mechanized by 1985. Full mechanization has yet to be achieved. See Chen Hui and Chang Ailing, “The Chinese Military’s 80-Year Historic Leap” (中国军队80年的历史性跨越), *Xinhua*, July 5, 2008. Translation.

† For more information on the new foreign policy guidelines introduced in 2018—known as “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”—see Chapter 2, Section 1 of U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2018 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2018, 161–162.

matic corps was gangster-like. “We treat our friends with fine wine,” said China’s ambassador to Sweden, “but for our enemies, we have shotguns.”*¹⁴¹ Chinese state media described this attitude as embodying a “Wolf Warrior” ethos, named after the nationalistic film franchise depicting PLA soldiers heroically battling U.S.-led mercenary groups, among other opponents, in Africa and other regions.¹⁴² Putting a fine point on China’s new approach, in his response to the potential for U.S. retaliation against Beijing’s passing of its Hong Kong national security law, the head of China’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office replied, “The era when the Chinese cared what others thought and looked up to others is in the past, never to return.”¹⁴³

On August 28, during the first visit to Norway by a Chinese foreign minister in 15 years, Foreign Minister Wang publicly warned Norway against “politicizing the Nobel Peace Prize,” indicating that if the prize were awarded to Hong Kong democracy activists Beijing would consider it an attempt to “interfere in China’s internal affairs.”¹⁴⁴ In his meeting with Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soreide, Foreign Minister Wang alluded to China’s past punishment of Norway over the Nobel Peace Prize, warning that the two countries must “deal with sensitive issues appropriately to avoid the hard-won warming ties being disturbed again.”[†]¹⁴⁵

The CCP took new steps to deepen the “Party-ification” of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ensure its ideological commitment to CCP directives. Reflecting the emphasis on Party loyalty, Qi Yu, a specialist in ideological training with no prior diplomatic experience, was appointed as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ party secretary in early 2019—an unusual appointment for a post traditionally reserved for a vice foreign minister.¹⁴⁶ In an essay published in December 2019, Mr. Qi called for Chinese diplomats to “firmly counterattack against words and deeds in the international arena that assault the leadership of China’s Communist Party and our country’s socialist system.”¹⁴⁷

In another sign of the increasing emphasis on enforcing ideological conformity within China’s diplomatic apparatus, in July 2020 the CCP inaugurated the Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Research Center. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the center aims to coordinate nationwide “research, interpretation, and propaganda of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy.”¹⁴⁸ At the center’s unveiling,

*This line derives from “My Hometown,” a song first recorded in 1959 during the Mao era and widely seen as a paean to patriotism and the PLA.

† Beijing has sought or threatened to punish Norway over the Nobel Peace Prize several times in the past despite the prize being awarded by the Norwegian Nobel Committee and not the Norwegian government. In 1989, when the Committee awarded the prize to the Dalai Lama, Beijing threatened to cut economic ties with Norway if state representatives attended the ceremony. In 2010, Beijing cut off official ties with Norway and halted negotiations on a free trade agreement after the decision to award the prize to Chinese democracy advocate Liu Xiaobo. In the years that followed, Beijing restricted Norway’s salmon exports and maintained visa restrictions on Norway well above those for other European states. Relations between the two countries were not normalized until 2016, when Norway issued an apology stating that it “fully respects China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, attaches high importance to China’s core interests and major concerns, will not support actions that undermine them, and will do its best to avoid any future damage to bilateral relations.” Nobel Prize, “The Norwegian Nobel Committee,” October 16, 2020; *Bloomberg News*, “China Warns Norway against Peace Prize for Hong Kong Protesters,” August 28, 2020; Sewell Chan, “Norway and China Restore Ties, 6 Years after Nobel Prize Dispute,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2016; Richard Milne, “Norway Sees Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Prize Hurt Salmon Exports to China,” *Financial Times*, August 15, 2013; Jamil Anderlini and Clare MacCarthy, “China Snubs Norway in Visa Reforms,” *Financial Times*, December 6, 2012; *Associated Press*, “China Threatens to Cut Ties with Norway over Nobel Award with AM-Nobels,” October 19, 1989.

Foreign Minister Wang claimed that traditional international relations theories were “unable to explain the contemporary world” and that Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy had become the sole theory of foreign policy capable of leading “the progress of humanity.”¹⁴⁹ He also stressed the need for China to “transform” the global governance system to align more with the CCP’s preferences and called on China’s diplomatic corps to apply General Secretary Xi’s theories to diplomacy with countries around the world, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Africa.¹⁵⁰ (For more on China’s approach to diplomacy with African countries, see Chapter 1, Section 3, “China’s Strategic Aims in Africa.”)

Against this backdrop, Chinese diplomats grew more aggressive in their approach to diplomacy with the outside world, and particularly with the United States. In a significant break with past practices, China engaged in a slew of ad hominem attacks against U.S. leaders, a level of vitriol rarely seen since the normalization of U.S.-China diplomatic ties in 1979. In April 2020, *People’s Daily* personally attacked U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, stating, “Politicians like Pompeo have only prejudice, hatred, and private interests in their minds.”¹⁵¹ That same month, the director general for the CCP’s International Department made a thinly veiled criticism of U.S. President Donald Trump following a remark made by the president about COVID-19.¹⁵²

China’s diplomatic apparatus also launched attacks against U.S. allies and partners, even targeting local governments for actions Beijing viewed as contrary to its interests. In July 2020, following the British government’s criticism of Beijing’s handling of COVID-19 and announcement of a new review of Huawei’s participation in the United Kingdom’s (UK) 5G rollout, China’s ambassador to the country warned that London risked becoming China’s “enemy” if it acted against Beijing’s interests.¹⁵³ The Chinese government also reacted harshly when the mayor of Prague advocated for increased Czech-Taiwan engagement. In response, Beijing canceled a planned tour in China by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic threatened Prague that unless it changed its course, “the city’s... interests will suffer.”¹⁵⁴

Despite Beijing’s public exhortations for more combative diplomacy, some Chinese public figures voiced concern over the strategy’s consequences. Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University of China and a top adviser to China’s State Council, argued in May that China’s aggressive diplomatic posture would alienate the international community and urged Chinese leaders to revert quickly to a more measured approach to diplomacy, especially in light of worsening ties with the United States.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Zhu Feng, dean of international relations at Nanjing University, argued China’s “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy had worsened tensions between Washington and Beijing.¹⁵⁶

COVID-19 Outbreak Intensifies Confrontational Diplomacy

The COVID-19 outbreak was a major catalyst in the hardening of China’s confrontational approach to diplomacy, as Chinese diplomats made efforts to shift or deflect blame for the pandemic’s outbreak while strong-arming China’s partners into praising Beijing’s

response. When Australia called for an independent investigation into the origins of the outbreak, China's ambassador to the country threatened a boycott of Australia by Chinese tourists, students, and consumers.¹⁵⁷ China followed up on this threat by applying economic coercion at the state level, suspending beef imports, restricting coal imports, and discouraging cotton imports from Australia, imposing punitive tariffs on Australian barley, and warning Chinese students against studying abroad in the country.¹⁵⁸ When the EU sought to release a report on the role of disinformation in the pandemic, repeated protests from Chinese officials eventually led to the removal of a sentence on China's "global disinformation campaign to deflect the blame."¹⁵⁹

Meanwhile, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs forcefully denied that China or the CCP had reason to apologize for its conduct during the outbreak, disdainfully labeling this idea completely baseless and illogical.¹⁶⁰ According to Andrew Small, senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund, as a result of its aggressive tactics during the pandemic, Beijing's previous reputation as a source of relative stability dating from the 1997 Asian financial crisis and global financial crisis in 2008 has now been "shredded."¹⁶¹ In contrast to its prior warnings around a tightly defined list of "core interests," he argued, countries around the world have taken note that Beijing now "threatens the same measures against countries that do not want to include Chinese suppliers in their telecoms infrastructure or that demand an enquiry into the origins of a global pandemic."¹⁶²

Beijing attempted to generate praise for its response to COVID-19 through narrative control and what became known as "mask diplomacy." As early as February 3, General Secretary Xi instructed China's news media to prioritize "public opinion guidance" at home and abroad by publishing positive stories about the CCP's epidemic response.¹⁶³ As COVID-19 spread globally, Beijing seized the opportunity to spin a new narrative of China as a reliable partner and a responsible great power.¹⁶⁴ To this end, China staged public demonstrations of largesse through the provision of medical gear, medical teams, and expertise to other countries, covering its actions thoroughly in state media and downplaying donations by other states to China.¹⁶⁵

Beijing's promotion of these contributions reflected the broader ambitions behind the Chinese government's "Health Silk Road" framework,[†] which it has used as an attempt to position itself as a global healthcare leader. Beijing also engaged in "vaccine diplomacy," promising the Philippines, Southeast Asian countries along the Mekong River, Latin American and Caribbean countries, Pakistan,

*Notable examples of China's disinformation campaign in the EU were accusations against Italy and France made by Chinese diplomats and state media. When international attention focused on the increase in COVID-19 infections in Italy, state-sponsored tabloid *Global Times* suggested Italy was the real source of the virus. In April, France's foreign ministry summoned China's ambassador over a string of anonymous posts on the embassy's website falsely claiming France had left elderly citizens to die in care homes. Valbona Zeneli and Federica Santoro, "China's Disinformation Campaign in Italy," *The Diplomat*, June 9, 2020; Catherine Wong, "Too Soon: Chinese Advisers Tell 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomats to Tone It Down," *South China Morning Post*, May 14, 2020; *AFP News*, "France Summons Chinese Ambassador over Virus Comments: Ministry," *Barron's*, April 14, 2020.

†The Health Silk Road, first mentioned in 2017, falls under the BRI umbrella. Like BRI, the Health Silk Road remains vaguely defined. Kirk Lancaster, Michael Rubin, and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Mapping China's Health Silk Road," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 10, 2020.

Malaysia, and countries in Africa priority or other special access to future Chinese vaccines for COVID-19 in an attempt to bolster its image, increase its influence in the healthcare space, and encourage support for its diplomatic goals.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Chinese state-backed cyber actors attempted to hack several U.S. organizations conducting research on COVID-19, aiming to use stolen research in support of China's effort to produce a vaccine before the United States.¹⁶⁷ (For more on Beijing's efforts to use the COVID-19 pandemic to assert global diplomatic and ideological leadership, see Chapter 1, Section 2, "The China Model: Return of the Middle Kingdom.")

China's COVID-19 diplomacy generated mixed reactions. Some politicians in affected countries expressed gratitude for China's assistance, such as Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, who called China "the only country that can help."¹⁶⁸ However, China's actions also met with backlash, with critics pointing out that some of China's provisions of medical equipment were actually goods donated to China during the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak and which China then sold—not donated—back.¹⁶⁹

In a sharp departure from traditional protocol for humanitarian relief efforts, Chinese officials often demanded recipients make public declarations of gratitude in exchange for the aid shipments.¹⁷⁰ For example, Beijing attempted to solicit public statements of gratitude from government officials in Germany and pressured the president of Poland to call General Secretary Xi to express his gratitude, while repeatedly highlighting international leaders' positive comments on China's response to the virus in state media for domestic consumption.¹⁷¹

CCP officials also attempted to persuade a U.S. state legislature to praise Beijing's response to the pandemic. On February 26 and again on March 10, a diplomat from the Chinese consulate in Chicago sent unsolicited emails to the president of the Wisconsin state senate requesting that the body pass a resolution praising the CCP's response to the virus and its "transparent and quick" sharing of information.¹⁷² In June, Twitter removed from its platform 23,750 highly active accounts and approximately 150,000 amplifier accounts, many of which had posted pro-China messages and disinformation related to the pandemic.¹⁷³ According to a statement from Twitter, all of the roughly 170,000 accounts had been attributed to China and were engaged in a "manipulative and coordinated" attempt at "spreading geopolitical narratives favorable to the... CCP."¹⁷⁴

Beijing's Influence in the UN Undermines Global Response

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed the extent and effects of China's influence in the UN in general and the WHO in particular. In the early days of the outbreak, the WHO refrained from criticizing Beijing's coverup and did not put public pressure on Chinese authorities to release the crucial details that could have helped contain the crisis. Even as CCP censors deleted information from the internet to keep citizens in the dark, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus publicly praised Beijing's transparency and response to the virus.*¹⁷⁵ As Beijing's lack of transparency became

*According to the Associated Press, recordings of internal WHO meetings demonstrate that the organization initially praised China in an attempt to coax crucial information out of Beijing with-

increasingly obvious, he continued his public defense of China and projected confidence about China's ability to contain the virus.¹⁷⁶ Beijing also used its leverage in the WHO to stifle Taiwan's participation in global pandemic response efforts.¹⁷⁷ (For more information, see Chapter 4, "Taiwan.")

Throughout the pandemic, Ren Minghui, a 30-year veteran of China's Ministry of Health, occupied the position of WHO assistant director-general for communicable diseases. He has held this position since 2017, which involves oversight of the WHO's work on communicable diseases and representing the WHO in international forums for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria.¹⁷⁸ While no information is publicly available about his duties during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Ren's leading position in coordinating the WHO's response to communicable diseases suggests he may have played a role in the organization's failure to push for transparency from Beijing.

The effects of Chinese leadership in other UN agencies also became apparent in 2020.* Early in the year, China made a push for leadership in the World Intellectual Property Organization. The race between Beijing's candidate, Binying Wang, and the U.S.-supported candidate, Daren Tang of Singapore, played out as a high-profile struggle for influence between the United States and China over global intellectual property standards.¹⁷⁹ Prior to this race, U.S. concerns over the issue of Beijing's leadership in UN agencies had already crystalized following the victory of China's Qu Dongyu in the June 2019 election for the position of director-general at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.¹⁸⁰

Global Views Harden against China

Beijing's role in the pandemic, its escalating repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and its aggressive global push for influence led many countries to consider significant changes to their relationships with China. At the same time, the pandemic revealed the enduring strength of China's partnerships with countries like Russia and Iran.

The year 2020 saw a significant hardening of views in the parliaments and publics of both Brussels and individual EU member states. In late March, the EU's top foreign and security policy coordinator Josep Borrell warned EU countries to be wary of China's "politics of generosity" and called upon them to prepare for a "strug-

out upsetting CCP authorities. It was reported, however, that as of the second week of January, the WHO chief of emergencies did not believe this strategy was working. Continued public praise for China's response by the director general after this time suggests pressure from Beijing may also have been at play. *Associated Press*, "China Delayed Releasing Coronavirus Info, Frustrating WHO," June 3, 2020; Stuart Lau, "Coronavirus: WHO Head Stands by His Praise for China and Xi Jinping on Response to Outbreak," *South China Morning Post*, February 13, 2020.

*The strong influence Beijing has in the WHO is not unique within the UN system, which has serious implications given Beijing's tendency to leverage individuals in leadership positions to push Chinese political objectives. China has increased its control of leadership positions in the UN over the past ten years, and organs with Chinese officials and citizens in top positions are a strong indication of Beijing's priorities. Chinese nationals currently lead four UN specialized agencies, which is more than any other country. They include the International Telecommunications Union, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the UN Industrial Development Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization. Many of these individuals rose up through a series of leadership roles within their organizations before reaching top positions. Melanie Hart, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on A 'China Model?' Beijing's Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards*, April 27, 2005, 5-6; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *PRC Representation in International Organizations*, April 20, 2020, 4.

gle for influence” in a “global battle of narratives” with China.*¹⁸¹ Sweden, formerly one of the top countries in Europe for exchange agreements with China, closed its last remaining Confucius Classroom in April amid worsening public opinion.¹⁸² Since 2019, Sweden has also ended twin city agreements with four Chinese cities, citing among other issues “threats that the Chinese embassy has directed toward the Swedish government.”¹⁸³ In late April, the chair of the European Parliament’s delegation for relations with China, Reinhard Bütikofer, stated, “Over these months China has lost Europe,” citing what he called “the pervasiveness of an attitude that does not purvey the will to create partnerships, but the will to tell people what to do.”¹⁸⁴

Parliamentary pressure for a tough stance on China also increased in Germany, especially following Beijing’s imposition of its security law in Hong Kong.¹⁸⁵ In late July, authorities in France reportedly imposed restrictions to prevent telecommunications operators from renewing licenses on existing Huawei 5G equipment, amounting to a de facto ban on the technology by 2028.¹⁸⁶ Italy also took steps to limit Huawei’s participation in the country’s 5G rollout.¹⁸⁷ Also in July, Delegation Chair Bütikofer criticized German automaker Volkswagen for ignoring the CCP’s human rights violations against Uyghurs while operating a factory in Xinjiang.¹⁸⁸ On August 2, Germany’s minister of state for Europe published an opinion article calling for unity among Europeans to stand up to China, warning that the CCP “passes up no opportunity to drive a wedge between the EU member states and weaken them.”¹⁸⁹

The UK displayed a similar trend. By April, London had begun considering whether the country would benefit from restricting Chinese ownership in high-tech companies or access for Chinese students to sensitive research topics.¹⁹⁰ On April 16, while standing in for Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was hospitalized with COVID-19, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stated it could no longer be “business as usual” with China after the pandemic.¹⁹¹ In late May, Prime Minister Johnson reversed his January decision on Huawei and announced new plans to reduce Huawei’s share in the UK market to zero by 2023, pressured in part by strong U.S. opposition and UK parliamentarians angered by China’s growing repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang and disinformation on COVID-19.¹⁹² On July 14, the UK government officially announced it would ban UK mobile providers from purchasing new Huawei equipment after the end of 2020, and that all 5G equipment from Huawei must be removed from UK networks by 2027.¹⁹³

Under the United States-led “Clean Network” initiative, about thirty countries located primarily in Europe and the Indo-Pacific committed to keep Huawei and other state-backed actors from ac-

* Beijing’s treatment of both EU member states and non-EU countries aroused concern in Brussels for different reasons. First, throughout the pandemic, authorities in Beijing continually chose to bypass and discredit the institution of the EU and interact with countries bilaterally. Beijing particularly sought to take advantage of the dissatisfaction that hard-hit countries like Spain and Italy felt with the EU’s pandemic response to boost its own reputation through medical aid. Meanwhile, Beijing used the pandemic as a chance to capitalize on its growing influence in non-EU states and present itself as a superior partner. After the EU enacted a ban on exports of medical equipment to non-EU countries, the president of Serbia—a non-EU country—turned immediately to Beijing and heaped praise upon General Secretary Xi and the CCP in exchange for a large shipment of medical aid. For more, see Stuart Lao, “EU Fires Warning Shot at China in Coronavirus Battle of the Narratives,” *South China Morning Post*, March 24, 2020.

cessing their networks.¹⁹⁴ The initiative, which the state-backed tabloid *Global Times* attacked as “madness,” began in April 2020 with requirements for secure 5G network traffic at U.S. diplomatic facilities and expanded in August to include additional provisions for carriers, mobile apps and app stores, cloud systems, and under-sea cables.¹⁹⁵

Sino-Russian Entente Deepens despite Pandemic Friction

China and Russia continued to deepen their robust ties in 2020 despite some diplomatic and economic friction from the COVID-19 pandemic. In October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin called ties with China an “allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership”—stronger language than either side had used before to describe the bilateral relationship.¹⁹⁶ Beijing and Moscow took new steps to expand their economic cooperation, highlighted by the inauguration of a key gas pipeline project, the Power of Siberia, in December 2019. The \$400 billion project, under development since 2014, will significantly boost Russian energy exports to China over the next 30 years, delivering 38 billion cubic meters (28 million tons) of natural gas per year to China by 2024.¹⁹⁷ The two sides also opened the first vehicle bridge connecting northeast China to the Russian Far East just two months before the January 2020 spread of COVID-19 from China to Russia.¹⁹⁸

Beijing and Moscow also bolstered defense and dual-use technology cooperation. In late 2019, Russia announced it would provide assistance producing a missile warning system for China, and the pair conducted two first-time trilateral naval exercises, one with South Africa and the other with Iran.¹⁹⁹ Upon President Putin’s decree that 2020 would be the year of Sino-Russian science and technology cooperation, China and Russia boosted cooperation in dual-use technologies, such as telecommunications and artificial intelligence.²⁰⁰ Chinese telecom giant Huawei continued to deepen its presence in Russia. In March 2020, it announced a partnership with Russia’s largest bank, Sherbank, for a cloud services platform; promised to build an “artificial intelligence ecosystem” in Russia by 2025; and committed to train 35,000 Russian information technology specialists and build a research and development center in the country over the next five years.²⁰¹ In July 2020, the two countries’ space agencies agreed to take steps toward building a joint research base on the moon after their planned manned missions to the moon in the late 2020s. The base, which may serve dual-use functions, reportedly will be designed to monitor deep space and enhance remote sensing of Earth.²⁰²

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new frictions to Sino-Russian ties. Both countries became embroiled in a rare public diplomatic row when Russia closed its land border and most transport links in February 2020 after several Chinese citizens traveled to the country with the virus.²⁰³ The Chinese ambassador to Russia criticized Moscow for banning Chinese tour groups and deporting Chinese citizens who violated quarantine rules. Still, in a sign of the closeness of bilateral ties, Beijing’s response was more measured than with other countries that closed their borders with China.²⁰⁴ Carnegie Moscow Center senior fellow Alexander Gabuev

noted Kremlin officials were privately frustrated with Beijing's information-sharing on COVID-19, though they did not publicly criticize Beijing.²⁰⁵ Russia also backed an EU and Australia-led resolution at the World Health Assembly calling for an independent inquiry of the virus' origins.²⁰⁶ In the defense realm, Chinese media reported that Russian shipments of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to China were delayed due to the pandemic.²⁰⁷ Meanwhile, demonstrating strong support for a Chinese geopolitical rival, Russian defense officials announced that shipments of the same weapons system to India were still on track for delivery by 2021 even in the wake of the deadly Sino-Indian border clash.²⁰⁸

In other ways, the pandemic tightened the linkages between Beijing and Moscow, particularly through collaboration on disinformation and anti-U.S. messaging. Throughout the spread of the pandemic, Beijing and Moscow actively spread disinformation critical of the United States and other democracies while frequently echoing and reinforcing the other's narrative.²⁰⁹ The disinformation campaigns shared similar themes of deflecting international and domestic criticism of their own responses to the virus, criticizing the United States, and attempting to stoke domestic unrest in other democracies. Despite Moscow backing an independent inquiry on the virus' origins, it defended Beijing from widespread criticism of its response to the virus and fueled conspiracy theories about the supposed foreign origins of COVID-19.²¹⁰ Even before the pandemic, the two countries' media outlets were increasingly collaborating and amplifying the other's messages, such as by accusing the United States of provoking the Hong Kong prodemocracy protests and anti-Putin demonstrations in 2019.²¹¹

China Continues Opportunism in the Middle East

Beijing continued to pursue an opportunistic strategy in the Middle East driven largely by its economic objectives, specifically maintaining access to the region's energy sector.*²¹² Although signs emerged that China and Iran were moving to deepen their bilateral relationship, Beijing remained committed to robust diplomatic and economic partnerships with Iran's regional rivals, such as Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.†²¹³ China also balanced its military ties with regional countries, conducting a weeks-long naval exercise with the Saudi Royal Navy immediately prior to holding a trilateral naval drill with Iran and Russia in December 2019.²¹⁴ In July 2020, Beijing hosted a virtual summit of the ninth China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, praising Arab countries for their support of China's global diplomatic goals such as

*The Middle East has been China's number one source of imported petroleum since 1995, and China is now the largest net importer of crude oil from the region. *World Exports*, "Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China," April 12, 2019; Xi Chen, "China in the Post-Hegemonic Middle East: A Wary Dragon?" *E-International Relations*, November 22, 2018; Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, "China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon," *RAND Corporation*, 2016, 7.

†The Gulf Cooperation Council is a trade bloc that includes the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar. China has much more robust economic ties with Arab countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council than it does with Iran. For instance, China's trade with the bloc was worth over \$170 billion in 2019, compared with \$19 billion for Iran. Iran lags far behind both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as a trade partner and was only slightly ahead of Oman in 2019. Jonathan Fulton, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on U.S.-China Relations in 2020: Enduring Problems and Emerging Challenges*, September 9, 2020, 4.

isolating Taiwan and building a Sinocentric “community of common human destiny.”²¹⁵

Beijing and Tehran Explore an Expansion of Their Relationship

In July 2020, China and Iran reportedly moved closer to reaching a deal on a 25-year cooperation agreement that could fundamentally transform their relationship if fully implemented. As Jonathan Fulton, assistant professor at Zayed University, argued in his testimony before the Commission, the purported deal would go well beyond the parameters set by China’s current partnership with Iran and “represent a dramatic departure from China’s approach to the Middle East.”^{* 216}

Nevertheless, significant obstacles remain for both sides to finalize and implement the agreement. For example, Beijing’s reported pledge to invest \$400 billion in Iran under the terms of the deal appears highly unrealistic given that cumulative Chinese investment in the country over the last 15 years has totaled only approximately \$27 billion.²¹⁷ Chinese leaders may also hesitate to prioritize relations with Iran over concerns about antagonizing China’s other close partners in the region.²¹⁸ Although an Iranian official suggested a final agreement could be reached by March 2021, Chinese officials have yet to comment publicly on the deal.²¹⁹ Moreover, after news of the proposed deal leaked, many Iranian citizens and political opponents of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani rejected the deal on the grounds that it sold out Iran’s resources to China, building on longstanding opposition among the Iranian public to China’s growing influence over the Iranian economy.²²⁰

Against the backdrop of the potential cooperation agreement, Beijing and Tehran coordinated their messaging on the COVID-19 outbreak despite also experiencing tension from the pandemic’s severe economic and public health impact on Iran.²²¹ Iran was among the group of countries that suffered the most damaging public health effects from the virus,[†] yet the Iranian regime defended Beijing and repeated its messaging during the crisis. China and Iran cooperated on exchanges of medical personnel and equipment, while both countries rejected U.S. offers of assistance and echoed the other’s accusations of the United States unfairly restricting travel to China and preventing international medical assistance from reaching Iran.²²² Iranian officials and media also echoed Chinese disinformation efforts blaming the United States for causing the virus.²²³ During the initial COVID-19 outbreak, Foreign Minister Wang thanked his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif for being the first foreign official to publicly voice support for China’s fight against the virus.²²⁴

*According to a leaked draft of the agreement, the roadmap would reportedly (1) boost Chinese investment to \$400 billion in Iran’s energy, infrastructure, and telecommunications sectors; (2) guarantee long-term Chinese access to Iranian oil and gas at a steep discount; and (3) upgrade defense ties to allow Chinese access to strategic port facilities along the Sea of Oman. Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Meyers, “Defying U.S., China and Iran near Trade and Military Partnership,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2020.

†As of August 3, 2020, Iran had the tenth-most-confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University. Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, “COVID-19 Dashboard,” August 3, 2020.

Still, while Tehran almost never publicly criticizes Beijing, China's attempt to cover up the virus outbreak led some Iranian officials and the Iranian public to voice grievances regarding Beijing's lack of transparency about the virus. In April 2020, Iran's health ministry spokesperson accused Beijing of vastly underreporting cases and deaths linked to the virus, calling China's official numbers "a bitter joke."²²⁵ Iranian citizens also expressed anger toward Beijing for bringing the disease to Iran through Chinese business operations in the country.²²⁶ Nonetheless, reflecting Tehran's unwillingness to upset Beijing, Iranian officials allowed flights from China to continue operating even after confirming the virus had spread to Iran.²²⁷ In a further sign of the Iranian regime's fear of antagonizing China, shortly after making his remarks criticizing China, Iran's health ministry spokesperson praised the Chinese government's assistance to Iran.²²⁸

Beijing and Tehran's security ties will probably deepen after the UN arms embargo on Iran expires in October 2020 and Beijing can resume arms sales to Tehran.* In September 2020, China joined most other members of the UN Security Council in rejecting U.S. calls to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran.²²⁹ According to a senior U.S. intelligence official, Iran will likely buy fighter jets and tanks from both China and Russia upon the embargo's expiration.²³⁰ Other Iranian purchases of Chinese weapons systems, such as antiship and land-attack cruise missiles, could bolster Tehran's ability to target U.S. ships and bases out to a range of 400 kilometers (249 miles) and deny access to the Persian Gulf.²³¹ In addition, Chinese individuals and entities continued to violate U.S. and UN sanctions on transfers of sensitive dual-use equipment to Iran, prompting Washington to sanction four Chinese entities and individuals in February 2020 for supporting Iran's missile program.†²³² Chinese entities also persisted in their defiance of U.S. sanctions on Iranian oil exports and blacklisted companies, resulting in further U.S. sanctions on four Chinese mainland and three Hong Kong entities.‡

*The Obama Administration signed the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 with the other P5+1 countries (China, France, Russia, and the UK, plus Germany) and Iran. Although the Trump Administration withdrew from the agreement, it remains in force and all the other signatories have expressed their desire to adhere to its terms. The deal stipulates that the UN arms embargo on Iran must be lifted on October 18, 2020, with the exception of goods and technologies that could be used to develop nuclear weapons delivery systems. The latter provision is scheduled to be lifted in 2023. Andrew Hanna, "Part 3: Europe, China and Russia on U.N. Arms Embargo on Iran," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 20, 2020; Kelsey Davenport, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," May 2018; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "UN Arms Embargo on Iran," January 20, 2016.

†Per the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act, the U.S. Department of State announced two-year sanctions on Luo Dingwen, Baoding Shimaotong Enterprises Services Company Limited, Gaobeidian Kaituo Precise Instrument Co. Ltd., and Wuhan Sanjiang Import and Export Co., Ltd. for supporting Iran's missile program. The sanctions restrict these individuals and firms from U.S. government procurement, assistance, and exports. Michael R. Pompeo, "New Sanctions under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA)," *U.S. Department of State*, February 25, 2020.

‡The State Department announced sanctions on Chinese companies Dalian Golden Sun Import & Export Co., Ltd.; Tianyi International (Dalian) Co., Ltd.; and Aoxing Ship Management (Shanghai) Ltd., as well as Hong Kong-based companies McFly Plastic HK Limited; Saturn Oasis Co., Limited; and Sea Charming Shipping Company Limited for "knowingly engaging in a significant transaction for the purchase, acquisition, sale, transport, or marketing of petrochemical products from Iran." In addition, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced sanctions on Shanghai Saint Logistics Ltd. for acting as a sales representative for the blacklisted Iranian airline Mahan Air. Mengqi Sun, "U.S. Sanctions Chinese Company, Alleges Ties to Iran's Mahan Air," *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2020; U.S. Department of State, *Sanctions on Entities Trading in or Transporting Iranian Petrochemicals*, March 18, 2020.

Beijing Ramps Up Coercion in the Indo-Pacific

In the Indo-Pacific region, Beijing ramped up its multiyear coercion campaign against its neighbors as they struggled to contain COVID-19 within their borders. At the National People's Congress in May, Defense Minister Wei called on Beijing to "use fighting to promote stability," potentially indicating China's intent to initiate military tensions with its neighbors to stabilize its periphery by projecting an image of strength.²³³ Meanwhile, Beijing's increase in its military and economic coercion prompted policy changes in countries across the region, such as in South Korea and Japan, who moved to decrease their economic reliance on China.²³⁴ Singapore and Vietnam took steps to limit Huawei's participation in their 5G rollouts.²³⁵ In Australia, a poll released in June revealed that Australian public opinion of China had reached a historic low, with only 23 percent of respondents reporting trust in China's ability to act responsibly either somewhat or a great deal (down from 52 percent in 2018) and 94 percent supporting a reduction in Australia's economic dependence on China.²³⁶

China's increasingly assertive behavior also accelerated an increase in cohesion among the countries participating in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the "Quad," comprising the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Between March and May, these countries held weekly vice-ministerial-level meetings and one ministerial-level meeting to coordinate on containing COVID-19, restore their economies, and communicate shared strategic interests.²³⁷ Notably, for the first time the grouping also took on an expanded format, known as the "Quad Plus," which saw Brazil, Israel, New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam participating in various group discussions.*

Worsening China-Japan Ties

Despite attempts to reset their fraught ties, Beijing and Tokyo's relationship became more antagonistic in 2020. General Secretary Xi was slated to visit Japan for a summit in 2020, which would have marked the first Chinese state visit to Japan in 12 years. The summit, long under preparation, was postponed due to the outbreak of COVID-19.²³⁸ The bilateral relationship deteriorated following the postponed summit. In April, Japan earmarked \$2.2 billion as part of an economic stimulus package to help manufacturers shift production out of China, prompting an angry response from Beijing.²³⁹ In June, the Japanese Defense Ministry announced plans to create a post for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) affairs designed to counter Beijing's growing military power in the Indo-Pacific.²⁴⁰ In August, Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving prime minister, announced his retirement, with his former Chief Cabinet Secretary

*"Quad Plus" groupings conducted teleconferences at least three times between March and May 2020. The first meeting occurred on March 21 and included the Quad countries plus New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam. The second meeting occurred on March 28 and included the same grouping. The third meeting, which was the first at the foreign minister level, occurred on May 11 and included the Quad countries plus Brazil, Israel, and South Korea. Indrani Bagchi, "Focus on COVID in Quad Plus Meet," *Times of India*, May 13, 2020; Indrani Bagchi, "New Alliances, Grouping Being Created in Response to COVID-19," *Times of India*, May 14, 2020; Indrani Bagchi, "India, Quad-Plus Countries Discuss COVID-19 Battle, Economic Resurgence," *Times of India*, March 28, 2020; Indrani Bagchi, "India Joins Hands with NZ, Vietnam, S Korea to Combat Pandemic," *Times of India*, March 21, 2020.

Yoshihide Suga succeeding him in September.²⁴¹ The implications of this leadership change for the trajectory of Sino-Japanese relations remain unclear.²⁴²

Bilateral tensions also deepened over Beijing's expansive claims in the East China Sea as Chinese intrusions into waters and airspace near the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands and into Japanese airspace reached historic highs. As of December 2019, Chinese maritime incursions near the Senkaku Islands reached their highest level since 2012, the year Chinese maritime law enforcement and other ships began regularly entering those waters.²⁴³ According to the Japan Coast Guard, Chinese government ships had entered waters near the islands more than 1,000 times in 2019, a roughly 80 percent increase over China's intrusions the previous year.²⁴⁴ In May 2020, two China Coast Guard ships entered waters near the Senkaku Islands and attempted to evict a Japanese fishing boat operating there before being warded off by the Japan Coast Guard.²⁴⁵ This was the fifth time since 2013 that China Coast Guard vessels pursued Japanese fishing boats around the Senkaku Islands.²⁴⁶ In July, describing the increase in Chinese incursions near the Senkaku Islands as "unprecedented," the commander of U.S. forces in Japan reiterated Washington's "100%" commitment to assist Japan in the case of conflict with China.²⁴⁷

China also increased military pressure on Japan through a rare submarine deployment and military flights near Japanese airspace. In June, Japanese forces detected a submarine they believed to be Chinese operating off the coast of Amami Oshima, an island located between Kyushu (one of Japan's five main islands) and Okinawa, representing the first intrusion since 2018 of a Chinese submarine into waters within Japan's contiguous zone.²⁴⁸ Beijing also continued conducting military training and intelligence collection flights near Japan, with Japan Air Self Defense Forces scrambling 675 times to intercept Chinese fighter jets between April 2019 and March 2020, a 6 percent increase compared with the same period the previous year.²⁴⁹

Increasing Pushback against China's Coercion in Southeast Asia

Over the past year, Beijing's increasingly aggressive efforts to buttress its unlawful maritime claims and activities in the South China Sea prompted significant diplomatic criticism from countries in Southeast Asia. China's actions included intensive coercion by its coast guard and naval fleet, likely accompanied by diplomatic threats, that successfully prevented other countries from exploiting natural resources in their own exclusive economic zones (EEZs).²⁵⁰

In continental Southeast Asia, China deepened military ties with Cambodia although its standing in the region suffered from revelations by a U.S.-funded research report that China's damming of the Mekong River had likely exacerbated a 2019 regional drought.²⁵¹ The report deepened a rift between China and Lower Mekong countries, as Thailand withdrew support for Chinese plans to deepen parts of the Mekong, Vietnam sought intervention from ASEAN against Beijing's control of the waterway, and the multilateral Me-

kong River Commission* urged Beijing to cease withholding data on the amount of water held back by China's dams.²⁵² In September 2020, the United States launched the Mekong-U.S. Partnership; announced increased U.S. aid on issues such as water security; and held the partnership's inaugural Ministerial Meeting, which was attended by representatives from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.²⁵³

Large-Scale Coercion in the South China Sea

In 2020, Beijing took sweeping coercive actions to assert its expansive territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea, incurring significant diplomatic costs. In April, Beijing established two new administrative districts and named 80 additional maritime features in the Paracels and Spratlys, the first time it had named new features since 1983.[†]²⁵⁴ The governments of the Philippines and Vietnam both protested, with Manila refusing to recognize the new districts and Hanoi demanding Beijing "abolish its wrongful decisions."²⁵⁵ These actions followed China establishing two scientific research centers in the Spratlys in March, ostensibly to monitor local ecosystems but that likely also have capabilities to gather hydrographic data relevant for submarine operations.[‡]²⁵⁶

As in years prior, China's efforts to assert control targeted energy exploitation in the South China Sea. In testimony before the Commission, Bill Hayton, associate fellow for the Asia-Pacific Program at Chatham House, described China's multilevel pressure on Vietnam as a particularly notable example of its coercion this year. Following years of acute pressure on the Vietnamese government and its foreign energy exploration partners, Vietnamese state-owned energy company PetroVietnam canceled new drilling with Russian partner Rosneft in an oil field within Vietnam's EEZ that had been operating for 18 years.²⁵⁷ According to Mr. Hayton, oil industry observers assumed "this was again due to political pressure on the Vietnamese government."[§]²⁵⁸ China's efforts have not been universally success-

*The Mekong River Commission is an intergovernmental body that works with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Panu Wongcha-um, Prak Chan Thul, and James Pearson, "Mekong River Groups Urge China to Show Transparency after Dam Report," *Reuters*, April 15, 2020.

†The 80 features are a combination of rocks, low-tide elevations, and underwater features such as seamounts. Under the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea, rocks are entitled to only a territorial sea, a 12-nautical-mile area extending from a country's coastline considered to be its sovereign territory. Low-tide elevations and underwater features do not qualify as islands under the UN Convention for the Law of the Sea, and are thus not entitled to a territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone, or continental shelf. Furthermore, China's attempt to buttress its territorial claims by unilaterally naming the features holds no legal weight. According to judicial precedent for sovereignty disputes, unilateral actions by a claimant state are legally "meaningless" if they are taken after the "critical date" when a dispute arose and are "strictly with the aim of buttressing those claims" or "undertaken for the purpose of improving the legal position" of the claimant. Drake Long, "Sandbars, Submerged Reefs, and Underwater Canyons: China's New Claims in the South China Sea," *Radio Free Asia*, 2020; United Nations, "United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea," December 10, 1982, 1833 U.N.T.S. art. 2; United Nations, "United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea," December 10, 1982, 1833 U.N.T.S. art. 13, 121; Jonathan G. Odom, "How a 'Rules-Based' Approach Could Improve the South China Sea Situation," in *Perspectives on the South China Sea*, Murray Hiebert, Phuong Nguyen, and Gregory B. Poling, eds., Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 2014, 121–22.

‡The 2020 National People's Congress all but confirmed these research centers will support China's military and paramilitary coercion. Under a law passed in June, all administrative districts must furnish the People's Armed Police, including the China Coast Guard, with meteorological, hydrographic, and environmental data, such as that collected by the two new research centers. China's Ministry of Justice, *People's Armed Police Law of the People's Republic of China*, June 20, 2020.

§China has employed military and paramilitary coercion, including through military leader visits, to force Vietnam to restrain its own companies from drilling in the South China Sea for years.

ful. In October 2020, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte lifted a drilling moratorium first imposed in 2015 despite General Secretary Xi reportedly threatening the Philippines with war in 2017 should it resume drilling.²⁵⁹

China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea in 2020 also included physical attacks and overt threats. A Chinese survey ship operated for months in Vietnam's EEZ, while in April a China Coast Guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat operating in waters claimed by Vietnam near the Paracels.*²⁶⁰ In May, a PLA Navy frigate reportedly aimed its fire-control radar† at a Philippine corvette, which Philippines military officers interpreted as a threat to fire on the vessel.²⁶¹ The Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs issued statements of support and solidarity with Vietnam after the China Coast Guard sank the Vietnamese fishing vessel, and Manila lodged diplomatic protests against China for its new administrative claims and the fire-control radar incident.²⁶²

China's Coercion of Malaysia over Oil and Gas Exploration

China's standoff with Malaysia from late 2019 to early 2020 offers a notable example of how Chinese maritime forces attempted to prevent other countries from undertaking new oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea, seizing on opportunities to undermine U.S. regional influence in the process.²⁶³ In December 2019, China Coast Guard vessels began a two-phase, months-long harassment campaign against a Malaysian drillship operating in the Malaysia-Vietnam Joint Defined Area, an area located approximately 700 nautical miles from China's Hainan Island where Malaysia and Vietnam resolved overlapping EEZ claims with an agreement for shared development.²⁶⁴

The first phase of China's harassment campaign began in December 2019, the same month Malaysia submitted information to the UN extending its continental shelf and EEZ claims.²⁶⁵ Around the same time, Beijing dispatched China Coast Guard vessels to harass a Malaysian drillship operating in the Malaysia-Vietnam Joint Defined Area within Malaysia's presubmission EEZ. The Chinese deployment began a month-long standoff that did not end until the Royal Malaysian Navy dispatched a destroyer in January, prompting the China Coast Guard vessels to withdraw.²⁶⁶

The second phase of China's harassment campaign began on April 13 when Beijing dispatched a survey ship with a China Coast Guard and maritime militia escort near the Malaysian

According to Mr. Hayton, Vietnam canceled a drilling project in 2017 after Beijing communicated a "specific threat to attack" one of Vietnam's stilt platforms situated in shallow waters around a key drilling area in its EEZ. In 2019, a Chinese ship rammed and sank a Philippine fishing boat anchored near Reed Bank in the Philippines' EEZ. See Bill Hayton, written testimony for U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on U.S.-China Relations in 2020: Enduring Problems and Emerging Challenges*, September 9, 2020, 6; Renato Cruz De Castro, "Incident at Reed Bank: A Crisis in the Philippines' China Policy," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, June 20, 2019.

*Chinese vessels previously rammed and sank a Vietnamese boat in 2014. See *BBC News*, "Vietnam Boat Sinks after Collision with Chinese Vessel," May 27, 2014.

†A fire-control radar is an electronic device that tracks targets and transmits data for calculating firing trajectories. U.S. Navy, *Fire Controlman, Volume 2—Fire-Control Systems and Radar Fundamentals*, April 2003.

China's Coercion of Malaysia over Oil and Gas Exploration— *Continued*

drillship, ostensibly on a survey mission.²⁶⁷ On April 18, U.S. Navy warships approached the area to counterbalance China Coast Guard activities, starting a series of pass-through operations that leveraged other U.S. Navy warships and Air Force bombers to maintain a U.S. military presence near the Malaysian drillship through May 12, when the drillship left the area.²⁶⁸

On April 23, the Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs issued a statement calling on “all parties,” including China and the United States, to work together for South China Sea stability.²⁶⁹ In this and all prior statements, the Malaysian foreign ministry declined to acknowledge publicly that Chinese vessels were engaged in any conflict, standoff, or illegal activity in the area.²⁷⁰ Chinese vessels did not withdraw until May 15, following a call between the Chinese and Malaysian defense ministers and a public statement from the Malaysian defense ministry, which did not acknowledge the pressure campaign and instead expressed “gratitude to the medical aid sponsored by China” and “mutual interest” in South China Sea stability.²⁷¹

Countries Align Their Policies with the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration Decision

China's actions in the South China Sea drew significant diplomatic rebukes as regional countries, the United States, and European countries endorsed the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision that invalidated significant elements of China's expansive “nine-dash line” maritime claims.*²⁷² In March, the Philippines submitted a note verbale to the UN reiterating its position that the 2016 decision “conclusively settled the issue of historic rights and maritime entitlements in the South China Sea,” marking a shift from prior policy to ignore the ruling in an effort to appease Beijing.²⁷³ Later that month, Vietnam submitted a similar note to the UN objecting to multiple elements of China's claims in the South China Sea and for the first time tacitly supporting the 2016 ruling.²⁷⁴ The protest established a new official Vietnamese position that no Spratly or Paracel feature, including those claimed by Vietnam, is entitled to an EEZ or continental shelf.²⁷⁵ In May, Indonesia also submitted a note to the UN rejecting China's claim to “historic rights” in the South China Sea and endorsing the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling.²⁷⁶ In June, the U.S. mission to the UN submitted a note rejecting China's claim to “historic rights” and additional claims of internal waters between features in the South China Sea.²⁷⁷

On July 13, Secretary Pompeo articulated a new position aligning U.S. policy with the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling by

*As of September 2020, Australia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, the United States, the UK, and Vietnam have all endorsed the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling's determination that China's claim to historic rights in the South China Sea is illegal. With the exceptions of France, Germany, and Malaysia, these countries, along with Canada and Japan, have stated that China must comply with this ruling. See Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Who's Taking Sides on China's Maritime Claims?” September 24, 2020.

designating many of China's claims to offshore resources in the South China Sea "unlawful" and condemning Beijing's "bullying campaign" to control those resources.²⁷⁸ Following the announcement, India expressed tacit support for the U.S. position by reiterating that the Indian government supports freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, while Vietnam's foreign ministry issued a statement supporting the U.S. position insofar as it is in line with international law.²⁷⁹ In late July, both Australia and Malaysia issued diplomatic notes explicitly affirming the 2016 ruling and rejecting China's claims to historic rights in the South China Sea.²⁸⁰ The new Australian position went further than the U.S. position by also rejecting Chinese claims that Beijing's sovereignty over artificial islands is "widely recognized by the international community."²⁸¹ On September 16, the UK, Germany, and France also issued joint diplomatic notes to the UN rejecting China's claims to "historic rights" in the South China Sea as noncompliant with international law.²⁸²

China's actions in the South China Sea also halted a breakdown of U.S.-Philippines defense cooperation. In early June 2020, President Duterte chose to retain the longstanding Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, which he had previously declared in February he would terminate in favor of closer relations with China.²⁸³ Experts suggested the decision reflected a recognition in Manila that Washington remained a necessary partner to deter Beijing.²⁸⁴

Beijing Escalates Tensions with New Delhi

In 2020, Sino-Indian relations suffered their worst year in decades. In June, Chinese and Indian soldiers engaged in a deadly clash on their border, the first confrontation since 1975 that resulted in loss of life on either side.²⁸⁵ Tanvi Madan, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, argued in her testimony before the Commission that this clash marked a "turning point" in the Sino-Indian relationship and that it was unlikely the relationship would return to normal.²⁸⁶ Shortly after the skirmish, New Delhi announced plans to ban 59 apps developed by Chinese firms, including TikTok, a major Chinese video sharing and social media app that counted India as its largest overseas market.*²⁸⁷ In September, India banned 118 additional Chinese apps, arguing they were "hostile to national security."²⁸⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated calls in New Delhi to limit India's economic dependence on China. As the virus spread across India, in April New Delhi announced a \$394 million plan to manufacture active pharmaceutical ingredients domestically rather than import them from China.²⁸⁹ In June, the Indian government announced restrictions on Indian state-run companies working with Chinese technology companies such as Huawei and ZTE for any new 4G mobile networks.²⁹⁰ Indian officials also reportedly warned Indian telecoms operators against working with Chinese companies

*TikTok had more than 200 million users in India prior to the ban, which some estimated will cause the company to lose up to \$6 billion in revenue. Other prominent apps banned by the Indian government include Baidu, WeChat, and Alipay. Arjun Kharpal, "India Bans 118 Chinese Apps, Including Tencent's Hit Games, as Border Tensions Flare Up," *CNBC*, September 2, 2020; Zack Doffman, "TikTok May Lose Up to \$6 Billion as Result of India Ban; Users Urged to Delete App," *Forbes*, July 4, 2020; Manish Singh, "TikTok Goes Down in India, Its Biggest Overseas Market," *TechCrunch*, June 30, 2020.

in the rollout of new 5G networks.* In August, New Delhi barred Indian state-owned enterprises from using Chinese tankers to ship crude oil and petroleum products and has sought to partner with Japan and Australia to establish a “supply chain resilience initiative” likely aimed at limiting their economic dependence on China.²⁹¹ Even before the pandemic, in October 2019 the Indian government made moves to restrict academic collaboration with Chinese institutions, requiring universities to obtain approval from two separate Indian ministries before entering into academic cooperation agreements with Chinese institutions.²⁹²

The Most Severe Border Crisis in Decades

In June 2020, the PLA and Indian troops engaged in a massive physical brawl in the Galwan Valley, located in the far-western Ladhak region along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) separating the two countries.† The clash, which followed a series of standoffs beginning in early May along multiple sectors of the LAC, led to at least 20 Indian deaths and an unconfirmed number of Chinese casualties, the first time since 1975 that lives were lost in fighting between the two sides.‡²⁹³ According to Dr. Madan, if China’s goal from its actions was “to acquire territory... [the Chinese government] might deem the moves a success.”²⁹⁴ If Beijing intended to dissuade India from building infrastructure on its side of the LAC or warn it against aligning with the United States, however, “then the Chinese moves have been ineffective, if not counterproductive.”²⁹⁵

Some evidence suggested the Chinese government had planned the incident, potentially including the possibility for fatalities. For instance, several weeks prior to the clash Defense Minister Wei made his statement encouraging Beijing to “use fighting to promote stability.”²⁹⁶ Just over two weeks before the incident, in another potential indication of Chinese leaders signaling their intent to escalate tensions, an editorial in China’s state-owned tabloid *Global Times* warned that India would suffer a “devastating blow” to its trade and economic ties with China if it got “involved in the U.S.-China rivalry.”²⁹⁷ Satellite images depicted a large Chinese buildup in the Galwan Valley, including potentially 1,000 PLA soldiers, the week before the deadly skirmish.²⁹⁸

China and India have engaged in multiple physical clashes along their border for decades, but since General Secretary Xi assumed power in 2012 the two countries have seen five major altercations §

*As recently as December 2019, Huawei and ZTE were welcomed to participate in India’s 5G trials. Liza Lin, “China Tech Firms Face Backlash over Beijing’s Policies,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2020.

†The LAC is the demarcation that separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory on the two countries’ shared border. It is made up of three sectors: eastern, middle, and western. The two countries do not agree on many details of the LAC, including the exact length. Beijing and New Delhi have been unable to overcome their differences despite signing agreements and committing to various confidence-building measures. Ananth Krishnan, “The Hindu Explains | Who Does Galwan Valley Belong To?” *Hindu*, June 21, 2020; Sushant Singh, “Line of Actual Control: Where It Is Located, and Where India and China Differ,” *Indian Express*, June 1, 2020; Dean Cheng and Lisa Curtis, “The China Challenge: A Strategic Vision for U.S.-India Relations,” *Heritage Foundation*, July 18, 2011; Lisa Curtis, “U.S.-India Relations: The China Factor,” *Heritage Foundation*, November 25, 2008.

‡Beijing has not confirmed deaths on its side. Unconfirmed reports from Indian media assert that the PLA lost 43 soldiers. *Asian News International*, “China Suffered 43 Casualties in Violent Face-Off in Galwan Valley, Reveal Indian Intercepts,” June 16, 2020.

§These altercations include the 2020 Sino-Indian clash, the 2017 Doklam standoff, the 2015 Burtse incident, the 2014 Demchok standoff, and the 2013 Daulat Beg Oldi and Chumar stand-

along their border. The exact motivations behind the Chinese government's provocative behavior on the LAC this year remain unclear. The proximate cause of the clash appeared to be India's construction of a strategic access road to support troops stationed along the LAC. China has also built extensive infrastructure along the LAC in recent years.²⁹⁹ In the aftermath of the clash, Beijing asserted sovereignty over the entire Galwan Valley, a new claim and significant change to the territorial status quo.³⁰⁰

Tensions have increased since the initial clash, with China reportedly building up its troop presence along the LAC since July.*³⁰¹ In September, shots were fired for the first time since 1975 along the border around Pangong Tso, a strategic area near the site of the clash in June.³⁰² Although no injuries were reported, both sides accused each other of violating a 1996 agreement barring the use of firearms along the LAC.³⁰³ An Indian special forces soldier of Tibetan origin † also died along the LAC, reportedly from a landmine blast.³⁰⁴ In an unusual move, India allowed the soldier's funeral to be publicized and dispatched a high-ranking official from India's ruling party to attend.³⁰⁵ On September 10, the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers met in Moscow on the sidelines of the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit and pledged to defuse tensions, with Beijing agreeing to release five Indian nationals it had captured along the border.³⁰⁶ Despite this agreement, China subsequently conducted war games in Tibet.³⁰⁷

Political Friction and Cooling Trade Ties with North Korea

Although rhetoric between General Secretary Xi and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un remained publicly effusive in 2020, the countries' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant obstacles to bilateral trade and revealed small political rifts between the two countries. On the surface, the two leaders issued supportive statements to one another in 2020, with Kim sending a message of condolence to Xi in February regarding the COVID-19 outbreak and the two leaders exchanging letters in early May expressing mutual congratulations for successes managing COVID-19.³⁰⁸

Yet economic exchange between the two countries fell after North Korea closed its borders to China in January, ranking among the first countries to do so, with strict limits on imported goods.³⁰⁹ Com-

offs. The altercations have occurred despite Beijing and New Delhi agreeing to use "border personnel meetings" between local commanders to diffuse tensions along the LAC. Meetings include "flag meetings," convened to resolve urgent issues, and "scheduled meetings," which take place four times a year. In addition, as part of a 1996 agreement, Chinese and Indian troops are not permitted to carry firearms on the LAC in a further attempt to reduce tensions. Will Green, "Conflict on the Sino-Indian Border: Background for Congress," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, July 2, 2020; *New Indian Express*, "India-China Border Standoff: After Diplomatic Negotiations, Now Army-Level Meet on Saturday," June 6, 2020.

* In July, the *Times of India* reported that China had deployed roughly 40,000 troops to the Ladakh region after the two sides agreed to disengage from the area in the aftermath of the clash. *Times of India*, "China Not De-escalating, Still Has Heavy Troop Presence on Ladakh Front: Sources," July 22, 2020.

† The soldier belonged to the Special Frontier Force, an elite commando unit set up in the aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian war. The force consists mostly of ethnic Tibetans and was trained by the Central Intelligence Agency until 1972. China is particularly sensitive to ethnic Tibetans serving in foreign militaries. Reacting to the news of the soldier's death, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman said, "We are firmly opposed to any country, including India, supporting the secession activities of Tibetan pro-independence forces or providing them with any assistance or physical space." Yang Ming, "Death of Tibetan Commando Offers Insight into Little-Known Elite Indian Force," *Voice of America*, September 18, 2020.

pared to the same periods in 2019, China-North Korea trade volume fell by 28 percent over January and February 2020, by 55.5 percent in March 2020, and by 66.6 percent in April 2020.³¹⁰ Also in April, North Korean leader Kim was absent from North Korean public view for an unusual three-week stretch. After his reappearance, a research fellow from the China Institute of International Studies, a think tank administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, publicly questioned the North Korean regime's durability due to Kim's health, a diplomatic affront potentially revealing China's skepticism toward the North Korean regime or toward the North Korean leader himself.³¹¹

An Openly Confrontational U.S.-China Relationship

The U.S.-China relationship grew openly confrontational in 2020 as both governments characterized the other in sharply adversarial terms and unfavorable views toward China among the U.S. public reached a new historic high. The Chinese government's attempts to cover up and redirect blame for the COVID-19 outbreak helped crystallize the increasingly negative U.S. government and public views. In the early stages of the outbreak, authorities in Beijing rejected U.S. offers of assistance while withholding key data on the spread of the disease, building suspicion about the CCP's handling of the crisis and making its growth to global pandemic status more likely.³¹²

Once it became clear that COVID-19 was not contained, Chinese diplomats initiated a campaign to blame the evolving pandemic on the United States. In the second week of March, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian used Twitter to spread an unsubstantiated rumor that COVID-19 had originated in the United States.³¹³ In a series of five posts shared nearly five million times in the ensuing two days, he claimed the United States owed China an explanation for covering up information on patient zero and urged his then over 287,000 followers to spread the accusation.³¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Chinese Embassy in France posted a series of tweets suggesting the virus escaped from a lab in Maryland and claiming the United States had covered up the outbreak by reporting it as the flu.³¹⁵

Chinese actors also launched cyberattacks against U.S. organizations involved in COVID-19 research to gain the upper hand in the race to a vaccine. In April, the Trump Administration blamed Chinese cyberactors for a wave of cyberattacks on hospitals and other healthcare providers, research laboratories, and pharmaceutical companies, as well as a series of daily strikes against the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.³¹⁶ On May 13, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency announced a formal investigation into attempts by People's Republic of China-affiliated cyberactors to illicitly obtain intellectual property and public health data related to vaccines, treatments, and testing for COVID-19.³¹⁷ The attacks on COVID-19-related information began as early as January, although Chinese cyberactors had targeted U.S. biomedical research long before COVID-19.³¹⁸ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the U.S. of rumor-mongering and claimed to be opposed to cyberattacks in all forms.³¹⁹

Existing U.S.-China Tensions Worsen

Tension over the pandemic highlighted friction in other dimensions of the U.S.-China relationship. Diplomatic language between the United States and China turned more openly confrontational, evidenced by Beijing's ad hominem attacks on top U.S. leaders. In June and July, high-level members of the Trump Administration delivered a series of speeches on China policy, focusing specifically on the actions of the CCP and calling attention to China as a priority national issue.

On June 24, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien delivered a speech in which he warned Americans that the CCP seeks economic, political, physical, and ideological control over people both at home and abroad and compared General Secretary Xi to Joseph Stalin.³²⁰ In a speech on July 7, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Christopher Wray called the threat of espionage from China the "greatest long-term threat" to U.S. information, intellectual property, and economic vitality.³²¹ On July 16, U.S. Attorney General William Barr spoke on economic issues and the United States' response to the CCP's global ambitions, which he called "the most important issue for our nation and the world in the twenty-first century."³²² On July 23, Secretary Pompeo concluded the series with an address at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Using the words of President Nixon, he insisted "the world cannot be safe until China changes" and stated that "securing our freedoms from the Chinese Communist Party is the mission of our time."³²³

Policy developments in the United States mirrored the change in tone. In May, the White House issued an order suspending visas for particular categories of approximately 3,000 Chinese students seeking to study in the United States out of concern that some Chinese postgraduate students were using research and study in the United States to collect intellectual property in support of the Chinese government and PLA.³²⁴ Throughout July and August, U.S. government agencies implemented a series of measures against Chinese entities involved in human rights violations in Xinjiang, repression in Hong Kong, and unlawful construction activities in the South China Sea. Entities sanctioned regarding Xinjiang human rights violations included three senior CCP officials, the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau, and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps.³²⁵ On July 20, the U.S. Department of Commerce added to the Entity List 11 Chinese companies also implicated in Xinjiang human rights violations.*³²⁶

On August 7, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on 11 officials from China and Hong Kong, including Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, for actions undermining Hong Kong's autonomy and Hong Kong citizens' right to free expression.³²⁷ On August 17, Beijing retaliated by announcing unspecified sanctions

*According to the Treasury Department, "The Entity List is a tool utilized by BIS to restrict the export, reexport, and transfer (in-country) of items subject to the Export Administration Regulations to persons (individuals, organizations, companies) reasonably believed to be involved, or to pose a significant risk of becoming involved, in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States. Additional license requirements apply to exports, reexports, and transfers (in-country) of items subject to the Export Administration Regulations to listed entities, and the availability of most license exceptions is limited." U.S. Department of Commerce, "Commerce Department Adds Eleven Chinese Entities Implicated in Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang to the Entity List," July 20, 2020.

against 11 U.S. individuals, including six members of Congress and the heads of five organizations promoting democratic causes,* whom it accused of interfering in China's internal affairs with regard to Hong Kong.³²⁸ On August 26, the Commerce Department added 24 Chinese companies to the Entity List for their role in helping construct and militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea.³²⁹ The list included five subsidiaries of China Communications Construction Corporation, a major contractor for BRI projects that has built ports around the world and supplied cranes and other services to U.S. ports.³³⁰

The United States also took steps to address concerns over China's widespread espionage and influence operations. On July 22, the United States directed the Chinese government to close its consulate in Houston, Texas, accusing it and other Chinese diplomatic missions in the United States of economic espionage and visa fraud.³³¹ The decision prompted angry reactions from China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson and the Chinese Embassy in the United States.³³² In retaliation, the Chinese government ordered the United States to close its consulate in Chengdu.†³³³ On August 13, the State Department designated the Confucius Institute U.S. Center, the Washington, DC-based de facto headquarters of China's Confucius Institute network, as a foreign mission of the People's Republic of China.³³⁴ Under the new designation, the Confucius Institute U.S. Center is required to inform the State Department regularly about its personnel, recruiting, funding, and operations in the United States.³³⁵

Military tension also continued between the two sides. In his remarks at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper referred to China as "the Pentagon's top concern."³³⁶ He urged the international community to "wake up to the challenges presented by China's manipulation of the long-standing international, rules-based order" while calling upon the Chinese government to "be transparent and respect the sovereignty, freedom, and rights of all nations."³³⁷ Meanwhile, the PLA decried the U.S. Navy's continuing high rate of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, where the United States publicly reported eight such operations between January 1 and October 12, 2020.³³⁸

Media Challenges and Expulsions

Beijing responded forcefully to U.S. efforts to establish reciprocal U.S.-China media access. On February 18, following long-term frictions over extremely limited U.S. media access in China, the State

*Sanctioned members of Congress include Senators Tom Cotton, Ted Cruz, Josh Hawley, Marco Rubio, and Patrick Toomey, and Representative Chris Smith. Sanctioned organization heads include Michael Abramowitz, President of Freedom House; Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy; Derek Mitchell, President of the National Democratic Institute; Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch; and Daniel Twining, President of the International Republican Institute. *Associated Press*, "China Sanctions 11 US Politicians, Heads of Organizations," August 10, 2020.

†The U.S. consulate in Chengdu, whose consular district included the Tibet Autonomous Region, Chongqing municipality, and Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces, played a crucial role in the United States' ability to monitor Chinese government abuses of China's Tibetan population. Keith Bradsher and Steven Lee Myers, "China Orders U.S. to Shut Chengdu Consulate, Retaliating for Houston," *New York Times*, July 24, 2020; Evelyn Cheng, "China Orders U.S. to Close a Consulate After U.S. Demands it Shutter Houston Outpost," *CNBC*, July 24, 2020.

Department designated five Chinese state-run media organizations* as foreign missions, noting that they are subject to the control of the Chinese government.³³⁹ In response, the next day China expelled three Wall Street Journal reporters from the country, with the Chinese foreign ministry claiming the expulsions were in response to a provocative opinion piece the Wall Street Journal had published.³⁴⁰

Less than two weeks after the expulsion, Secretary Pompeo implemented a personnel cap of 100 Chinese citizens on the same five Chinese state-run media organizations to establish reciprocity with China's restrictions on foreign media.³⁴¹ China's foreign ministry called the cap "oppression" and on March 18 enacted "countermeasures" by demanding operational and financial information from five U.S. media outlets in addition to expelling at least 13 reporters from the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal, representing nearly all reporters from those outlets in the country.³⁴² On June 22, the State Department designated an additional four Chinese state-run media outlets as foreign missions.[†]³⁴³

*These include Xinhua News Agency, China Global Television Network, China Radio International, China Daily Distribution Corporation, and Hai Tian Development USA, which is the U.S. distributor for the *People's Daily*.

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