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**The Global Security Initiative: China Outlines a New Security Architecture**

*John S. Van Oudenaren*

On February 20, Xinhua released a statement on “U.S. Hegemony and its Perils,” which claims to expose “U.S. abuse of hegemony in the political, military, economic, financial, technological and cultural fields” and bring “international attention to the perils of the U.S. practices to world peace and stability and the well-being of all peoples” ([Xinhua](#), February 20). The polemic charges the U.S. with “clinging to the Cold War mentality,” intensifying “bloc politics” and “stoking conflict and confrontation.” A day after the PRC laid out its case against “U.S. hegemony,” the Foreign Ministry released a new concept paper on the Global Security Initiative (GSI) that seeks to frame China as a viable alternative to the U.S. as an international and regional security partner ([FMPRC](#), February 21; [FMPRC- English](#), February 21). On February 24, the PRC Foreign Ministry released a twelve-point proposal for a political settlement of the Russia-Ukraine War calling for a cessation of hostilities and peace talks ([FMPRC](#), February 24). China’s recent diplomatic push to serve as an arbiter of the most

intractable and destructive European conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century serves to further reinforce its promotion of itself, through the GSI and other efforts, as an honest broker in global security affairs.



*(PRC Foreign Minister Qin Gang introduces the GSI concept paper at the Lanting Forum on February 21, source: FMPRC)*

The GSI Concept Paper opens with a reiteration of the six founding commitments stated by President Xi Jinping at the launch of the initiative at the Boao Forum last April, beginning with advancing his signature “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security concept” (共同、综合、合作、可持续的安全观) (for a full list of the six commitments, see [China Brief](#), May 13, 2022). However, it is the subsequent sections of the new concept paper on “Priorities for Cooperation” (重点合作方向) and “Mechanisms of Cooperation” (合作平台和机制), which offer a broad outline for how China envisions an alternative, post-American international security architecture. The GSI concept paper’s Priorities for Cooperation section details how the PRC would address transnational security challenges and achieve stability in different regions, including “hotspots” where geopolitical or sectarian strife is endemic, including Ukraine, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula ([FMPRC](#), February 21). The final Mechanisms of Cooperation section suggests the initiative will draw heavily on the existing network of Sinocentric multilateral organizations that China has built up over the past two decades. Beijing also seeks to capitalize on its clout at the UN by sustaining the global body as the “core” of the international system and upholding its authority as “the main platform for global security governance” ([FMPRC](#), February 21). Of course, the GSI concept paper never addresses the contradiction between upholding UN-centrality and advancing a parallel international institution with an overlapping remit.

### **Global Problems, Chinese Solutions**

The new GSI concept paper was first introduced by Foreign Minister Qin Gang in his keynote remarks to the Foreign Ministry's Lanting Forum (蓝厅论坛) on "The Global Security Initiative: China's Proposal for Solving Security Challenges" ([FMPRC](#), February 21). In his remarks, Qin cited the Soviet-era concept of "indivisible security," which has been inherited by Putin's Russia and the PRC. Indivisible security nominally asserts that the security of each state is interlinked with that of the broader regional and international environment, but is typically invoked by the authoritarian great powers to justify their dogged protection of "core interests." Qin also asserted that GSI "embodies the core essence" of the "community of common destiny," which is the organizing principle of the PRC's global economic and development strategic frameworks, the Global Development Initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ([People's Daily](#), February 22; [FMPRC](#), September 21, 2022). Like those initiatives, the GSI can be seen as providing a broad umbrella framework for existing Chinese policy efforts, in this case in the defense and security realm.

The twenty priorities for international security cooperation in the new GSI concept paper can be broadly divided into international and regional challenges. Key examples from the twenty priority areas enumerated in the concept paper are listed below. However, the concept paper stipulates that its list is not exhaustive, which suggests that the number of issues that GSI seeks to address is likely to expand:

### ***International Priorities***

- **Promote stability in "major country" politics:** The GSI will seek to "promote coordination and sound interaction among major countries" forging relationships based on "peaceful coexistence, comprehensive stability and balanced development." The language in this section is almost assuredly largely written with the U.S. in mind, but also likely applies to Russia, Europe, India and perhaps others.
- **Support non-proliferation regimes and prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction:** The PRC calls for avoiding nuclear war and arms races; prohibiting biological and chemical weapons under the relevant conventions, but neither nuclear nor missile technology arms control is discussed.
- **Promote international maritime peace and security and maritime differences:** The GSI outline calls for enhanced cooperation on shared maritime security challenges, including piracy. The intention to resolve maritime differences is raised, but China's disputes with neighbors in the East and South China Seas are unacknowledged.
- **Safeguard global food and energy security:** The GSI will also extend to ensuring efficient global agricultural and energy supply lines. This includes avoiding "politicizing and weaponizing food security issues." Enhancing energy and food security have been major policy areas of emphasis for Beijing since the Russia-Ukraine War erupted last year, roiling global food and energy markets ([China Brief](#), June 17, 2022).
- **Collectively manage the dangers posed by AI and other emerging technologies:** The outline cites a particular concern with autonomous military applications of these technologies.

### ***Regional Priorities***

- **Promote political settlements of regional hotspot issues:** The concept paper casts China as a sort of honest broker that is ready to serve as both a guarantor and provider of inclusive security in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Pacific Island Countries.
- **Africa:** The concept paper calls for supporting African states' efforts to resolve regional conflicts and combat transnational threats such as terrorism and piracy. With regards to the strategically important Horn of Africa, which not only abuts key global sea lines, but is also where the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has a significant peacekeeping presence and its only permanent military facility on the continent in Djibouti, the concept paper cites the importance of the China-Horn of Africa Peace, Governance and Development Conference. This regional forum, which met for the first time last summer, convenes senior Chinese and African leaders from Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and South Sudan ([Forum on China-Africa Cooperation](#), July 23, 2022; [FMPRC](#), July 22, 2022).
- **Latin America and the Caribbean:** The GSI seeks to support regional peace and stability including through efforts to realize the commitments embodied in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States' (CELAC) "Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace." [This is and the omission of any reference to the Organization of American States suggest reducing U.S. influence in Latin America and the Caribbean is an implicit GSI priority].

### **Leveraging Existing Organizations**

The final section of the GSI concept paper includes a list of "platforms and mechanisms of cooperation." In addition to the UN Security Council, which Beijing holds a permanent seat on, the UN General Assembly and relevant committees, the concept paper calls for utilizing several existing organizations in which China plays leading roles in order to implement GSI: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the "China+Central Asia" mechanism. The paper also lists supporting an "ASEAN-centered regional security cooperation mechanism and architecture" as a priority, which suggests Beijing will seek to use the ASEAN-China and ASEAN-plus dialogues to socialize the GSI with Southeast Asian states. How successful this approach will be is questionable, as Southeast Asian countries have generally responded coolly to GSI ([ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute](#), February).

The GSI concept paper section on mechanisms also lists several global and regional security forums, which the PRC has established to facilitate exchanges with foreign states and promote Chinese "discourse power" on international defense and security issues. The organizations mentioned, which indicates they may have some role in socializing the GSI to foreign elites, include (organizer in parentheses):

- **China-Africa Peace and Security Forum** (Ministry of National Defense [MOD]): Ministerial Dialogue Between China's Defense Minister and about 50 African defense ministers or other senior officials ([China Brief](#), July 29, 2022; [MOD](#), July 26, 2022).
- **Middle East Security Forum** (China Institute of International Studies/ Ministry of Foreign Affairs): convenes senior-level diplomats to discuss new approaches to security in the region; the theme of the

most recent iteration was developing a "new security architecture" in the Middle East ([CGTN](#), September 22, 2022).

- **The Xiangshan Forum (MOD):** A track 1.5 dialogue including defense officials and senior military officers often described as China's antidote to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore ([China Brief](#), November 19, 2019).
- **The Global Public Security Cooperation Forum (Lianyungang)** (Ministry of Public Security; State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission [SASAC]) Assembles senior public security officials from over 30 countries to coordinate and share information on law enforcement issues, as well as undertake joint training and exercises ([Lianyungang Forum](#), December 16, 2020). The initiative originally focused on countering crime along the BRI, but has expanded to include policing cooperation on a host of other areas including transnational organized crime and cyber security.
- **A Future GSI Forum?:** The concept paper says that China will "hold high-level conferences on the GSI in due course to strengthen policy communication in the field of security, promote intergovernmental dialogue and cooperation, and further foster synergy" in global security cooperation. This suggests that just as China held two BRI Forums, a GSI forum may be a possibility in the future.

### **Conclusion**

As part of the publicity blitz surrounding the release of the GSI Concept Paper, the state-run *Global Times* published an English-language editorial entitled "All countries are welcomed to join Global Security Initiative" ([Global Times](#), February 21). Infused with the typical hyperbole that characterizes such propaganda messaging, the article claims that by further enriching GSI, "the concept paper meets the universal expectations of the international community, helps the international community to fully understand China's principles and concepts on global security issues" and provides a road map for relevant parties to deal with security disputes and address security dilemmas." Moreover, the *Global Times* maintains that any country that checks its "bias, prejudice, or narrow-minded personal interests" is able to "feel China's sincere attitude toward peace and the enormous value of Eastern wisdom in solving today's problems in the concept paper."

In discounting CCP propaganda assertions about the GSI, Western policymakers should be careful to avoid the reverse fallacy, which would be to assume that China's efforts to sell the GSI to an international audience are destined to fail. While Western democracies are unlikely to enlist in GSI, a host of regional and middle powers and smaller states across the Global South, could sign up. Leading candidates include authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states in Africa, Asia and Latin America that may feel compelled to choose sides as they increasingly see Washington and Beijing drawing battle lines in an emerging global struggle between democracies and autocracies.

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## The DPP's 2024 Presidential Candidate-in-Waiting: William Lai

Russell Hsiao



(Image: Vice President William Lai addresses a groundbreaking ceremony in Palau last year, source: Wikimedia)

### Introduction

Taiwan will hold closely watched presidential and legislative elections next January. While the major parties' presidential candidates have not been officially chosen, the nominee for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) has been all but formally anointed and, barring an unexpected event, will almost certainly be William Lai (賴清德, Lai Ching-te). The doctor-cum-vice president, former premier, mayor of the southern Taiwan metropolis of Tainan and lawmaker has a storied political career that distinguished him early on as a rising star within the DPP.

As Lai comes from a medical career with limited foreign relations experience, he would, if elected, have considerably less of an international profile than his predecessors. While his views on Taiwan's sovereign status are widely known in the Taiwan-and-China-watching community—although arguably not well understood—not much is known about his actual policy positions. What is known about Lai's ideological stance on Taiwan's independent status and cross-Strait relations, however, has left much to be desired among analysts, with international observers questioning how he would implement those beliefs should he be elected as the next president of Taiwan (Republic of China, 中華民國). As the races heat up, it is important to get a better understanding of the potential future leader himself, his values, intellectual influences, and policy

preferences, in order to assess their implications for a possible Lai administration's approach to cross-Strait peace and security.

### **From Coal Miner's Son to Vice President**

Born in 1959, William Lai is the youngest son in a family of six children from the rural village Wanli district (萬里區) on the northern coast of Taiwan. His father worked in the mines and died from a work-related accident when Lai was very young, and he and his siblings were all raised by his mother. The definitive moment that Lai himself attributed to his decision to switch from a life of medical practice to politics was in 1996, after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, when Beijing fired a series of missiles around Taiwan in order to intimidate voters ahead of the island democracy's first direct presidential election ([Office of the President \[Taiwan\]](#)).

Against his mother's wishes, Lai shifted away from his medical practice and officially entered politics in 1996 when he successfully won a seat in the National Assembly and then in 1998, he ran and won the race as the DPP legislator for Tainan. [1] He served a total of four consecutive terms in the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan's parliament) ([EBC News](#), December 24, 2022; [Formosa Television \[FTV\]](#), May 19, 2019). During that period, Lai studied at Harvard University, where he obtained a Master of Public Health. [2] In 2010, he won the race to serve as the mayor of Tainan Special Municipality. In 2014, Lai easily won re-election. In 2017, he was elevated from the local to the central government by President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) when he succeeded Lin Chun (林全) as her premier and then in 2020 as her vice president.

### **New Tide Faction Ties**

Lai has served in several very senior positions in Tsai's administration, but other factors will also shape his policy platform and team as he readies for his presidential run. One influential variable will be his association with the New Tide Faction (新潮流系), which is generally considered the largest—albeit unofficial—faction within the DPP ([Global Taiwan Brief \[GTB\]](#), July 27, 2022). While there are no real substantive differences between the factions in terms of overall party ideology, the policy orientation of the New Tide Faction is generally regarded as center-left. The faction is known to emphasize three broad policy stances: Taiwan independence, mass political participation and social democracy. The faction's stance on Taiwan independence is of obvious importance to cross-Strait relations.

President Tsai was able to keep factional infighting *mostly* in check by carefully managing appointments to the DPP's Central Executive Committee (CEC) ([Liberty Times](#), July 18, 2022). This is also a reflection of the overall power balance between the factions within the party. The New Tide Faction (新潮流) holds the most seats in the CEC with 30 percent (nine); with TNCPA (正常國家促進會) and the Ing Faction (英系) each holding 20 percent (six each), while the Taiwan Forward/Ocean Faction (湧言會/海派), Su Faction (蘇系), and the Green Fellowship Association (綠色友誼連線) each command 10 percent (three each) ([GTB](#), July 27, 2017).

Although no real substantive difference in positions of the DPP factions on Taiwan exist, there are genuine differences on the optimal policy approach. In 2019, a contentious DPP primary election, in which Lai

challenged Tsai for the party's presidential nomination, exposed these differences. The reason why the former premier challenged his own party's president was largely due to concerns from within the deep-green (深綠) camp about Tsai's approach to national and cross-Strait policy, which they believe led to its devastating loss in the 2018 local elections and deeper green pressure that Tsai was not doing enough to take a harder line against China and more actively assert Taiwan's independence. [3]

### **A Shift to a Deeper-Green Stance?**

As J. Michael Cole observed, Lai's "base rests primarily with the deeper-green side of the party, which embraces a more vocal and activist approach to Taiwan's self-determination" ([GTB](#), March 27, 2019). Former AIT Chairman Richard Bush also explained how "The 'Deep Green' favor a more radical approach to securing autonomy through measures that call for Taiwanese independence, while the 'Light Green' are conscious about both the potential for conflict and the need to sustain the benefits of cross-Strait economic relations. The only thing the two camps generally agree is that they must rely on the United States to deter Beijing and keep Taiwan safe." [4]

This deep-green base of support was also reflected in Lai's own words, which he is now mostly known for, when he described himself as a "pragmatic political worker for Taiwanese independence" (務實的台獨工作者) ([China Times](#), January 18). As a result, domestic media has labeled Lai the "golden child of Taiwanese independence" (台獨金孫) ([Liberty Times](#), June 20, 2017). Yet, to be fair, not much beyond these sound bites have been examined by Taiwan watchers to more fully understand what this potential future president means by "pragmatic political worker" and "independence."

In reality, Lai's long-held public stance on "Taiwan independence" belies a more nuanced approach toward this sensitive issue. In 2014, while serving as Tainan city mayor, Lai also traveled to Shanghai when not many senior DPP officials have ([CNA](#), June 7, 2014). It is also worth remembering that in 2017, Lai even stirred some controversy with his deep-green base while the party was undertaking significant debates about its policy platforms, when he said that the DPP's approach should be "pro-China, love Taiwan" (親中愛台). Some in the deep-green camp, saw these comments as Lai shifting away from his position on Taiwan independence. Lai further explained, "To be pro-China and love Taiwan is to take Taiwan as the core, and then offer China the hands of friendship" ([Taipei Times](#), April 16, 2018).

In subsequent exchanges, Lai has also clarified what he meant by calling himself a "political worker for Taiwanese independence." In addition to emphasizing what is now seemingly the mainstream position of the DPP that "Taiwan is a sovereign, independent nation and therefore does not need to declare independence" and that "only the nation's 23 million people have the right to decide Taiwan's future," Lai claims that his position as a "political worker" is based on a practical and pragmatic stance on independence, which depends on "building up Taiwan and making it stronger and more attractive to people so that they support it." Hence, for Lai, other key policy considerations include spurring economic growth, maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and working with allies and partners ([Taipei Times](#), April 16, 2018).

### **Foreign and Defense Policy Platforms**



Missing in much of the speculation about how a potential Lai presidency would upend the delicate cross-Strait balance is the fact that he has already laid out some important policy makers on what his policies on cross-Strait relations would be. As he took over as chair of the DPP in January—Lai issued a major policy statement with three pillars on cross-Strait relations ([DPP](#), January 18; [CTi News](#), January 18). In it, the presidential hopeful stated notably that:

- The DPP's current cross-Strait policy is based on the "1999 Resolution of Taiwan's Future" (台灣前途決議文) ([DPP](#)).
- Critically, "The DPP, under my leadership, will continue to stand firm on the "Four Commitments" (4個堅持) that is to (1) Uphold our free and democratic constitutional system (2) The Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other (3) Resist annexation or encroachment upon our sovereignty (4) The future of the Republic of China (Taiwan) must be decided in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people. We will use our utmost efforts to maintain the status quo of regional peace and stability."
- "Peace depends on national defense, and national defense depends on the people. (和平靠國防, 國防靠全民)" ([DPP](#), January 18).

These positions will likely form the basic foundation for Lai's cross-Strait framework and can be viewed as setting the floor for his future policy formulation as president. Party insiders note that this is an indication of Lai's commitment to the policies set by President Tsai Ing-wen and is intended to assure the United States that he will not deviate from this stance.

PRC officials often highlight the "independence clause" in the DPP charter as a major reason for refusing to negotiate with the party ([The Diplomat](#), July 23, 2014). However, as Cole notes, the clause was "inserted into the charter at the party's creation in the 1980s as Taiwan was emerging from decades of authoritarian rule [and] sets a *de jure* independent country, ideally known as the Republic of Taiwan, as a core objective for the party." It is in this context that Lai's emphasis on the "1999 Resolution of Taiwan's Future" is noteworthy and requires unpacking.

Contrary to the perception that the DPP charter shuts the door to cross-Strait talks, the 1999 resolution actually holds up the prospect for dialogue by recommending that "Taiwan and China should engage in comprehensive dialogue to seek mutual understanding and economic cooperation. Both sides should build a framework for long-term stability and peace." Moreover, the resolution also reaffirms commitment to the "status quo" and sets a high legal bar for change, stating that: "Taiwan, although named the Republic of China under its current constitution, is not subject to the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China. Any change in the independent status quo must be decided by all residents of Taiwan by means of plebiscite" ([TaiwanDC.org](#), May 8, 1999). At the same time, the proclamation notes "Taiwan should renounce the 'One China' position to avoid international confusion and to prevent the position's use by China as a pretext for annexation by force." The Resolution is quite flexible, even though Beijing is unlikely to reciprocate in kind.

### **Other Variables that Could Affect Lai's Policy**

Although the office of the presidency certainly matters for the policy of any new government, numerous structural factors that will also shape Lai's policies. For instance, despite the pro-independence and pro-unification instincts of Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) and Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), respectively, neither was able to fundamentally move the country towards either goal. Structural factors, as well as the constraints of public opinion that overwhelmingly favors some form of the "status quo" in a robust democratic system, have had a moderating effect on both presidencies ([Election Study Center, National Chengchi University](#), January 13; [GTB](#), February 23, 2022). These constraints will also help determine who would ultimately be electable in 2024, as well as the extent to which any presidential candidates' individual initiatives would elicit popular support.

Perhaps more telling for what a William Lai presidency could portend for cross-Strait policy is who his running mate will be in the 2024 elections. Currently, possible vice-presidential picks floated around political circles include: Taiwan's current ambassador to the United States, Hsiao Bi-khim (蕭美琴, b. 1971) and former Culture Minister Cheng Li-chun (鄭麗君, b. 1969) ([United Daily News](#), February 6). His vice president could play a very strong international role for a potential president with relatively less foreign policy experience. Moreover, the DPP has a relatively short bench for foreign and defense policy, so it is likely that Lai will bring on many of the seasoned hands from the Tsai administration. As a result, his administration will probably reflect more continuity than what many would expect, despite his deep-green orientation.

At the same time, Lai's relatively limited international exposure belies the fact that he has actually travelled to the United States on multiple occasions, has extensive experience with Japan, and has also engaged in talks in China as well ([Office of the President \[Taiwan\]](#)). For example, in May 2019, he traveled to Japan to deliver a speech to the House of Representatives on Taiwan-Japan relations. As vice president elect, Lai traveled to the United States in February 2020 and met with U.S. officials ([Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#), February 4, 2020). In January 2022, he traveled to Honduras, one of Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic allies, where he met briefly with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris during the inauguration ceremony of President Xiaomara Castro ([Taipei Times](#), January 29, 2022). Then in July 2022, Lai traveled to Japan to attend former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's funeral ([Focus Taiwan](#), July 13, 2022). In November 2022, Lai visited Palau in the Pacific Islands ([Taipei Times](#), November 2, 2022).

It is also worth remembering that as mayor of Tainan, Lai traveled to Shanghai in 2014. A speech that he delivered at Fudan University holds clue on how he may engage Beijing as president. At that event Lai made a notable statement: "Taiwan independence is certainly the DPP's proposition, but the DPP respects the decision of the people of Taiwan" ([CNA](#), June 7, 2014). "That is to say, once the 23 million people in Taiwan make a resolution on their future through democratic procedures, which is against Taiwan independence, or even the final unification, the DPP members should also obey the public opinion and fully accept it," he added.

Nevertheless, Beijing is still unlikely to engage in official dialogue with the DPP unless the party were to accept the "1992 Consensus" (九二共識) and "oppose Taiwan independence" (反台獨), which are two basic premises of Beijing's "One-China Principle" (一個中國原則) ([NEXT TV](#), February 12). Any such move would be a non-starter for Lai since it preconditions his "opposition to Taiwan independence." For Lai and the DPP,

the basis for and key to cross-Straits dialogue must be based on the commitment that the future of Taiwan is to be determined solely by its 23 million people. While the likelihood of official cross-Strait talks is low, Lai and his New Tide Faction could still potentially open a back channel to Beijing. Indeed, while not publicly well known, the New Tide Faction has its own channels to Beijing. According to one source, the New Tide Faction has had “a separate communications channel with officials from the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) under the Mainland’s State Council since 1997” ([KMT](#), September 13, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the prospect of a William Lai presidency for cross-Strait relations will likely mean that dialogue between the two sides will be limited over the next four years. At the same time, a more thorough understanding of Lai’s stance on Taiwan independence reveals that concerns about a dramatic or radical change in Taiwan’s cross-Strait policy are unlikely to materialize under a Lai administration. As tensions in the Taiwan Strait continue to mount, all parties within Taiwan seem to recognize the need to exercise prudence and pragmatism. The real question now is whether Beijing sees it the same way.

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**Editor’s Note:** *China Brief* typically uses simplified characters for Chinese script. However, as this article largely uses sources from Taiwanese media, the traditional characters used in the original context have been retained.

### **Notes**

[1] The National Assembly, which forms one leg of the tricameral parliament, was abolished in 2005. It is also around this time it is believed that Lai was recruited by the New Tide Faction of the DPP. Lai’s first foray into politics began in 1994 when he served as the local medical doctors association supporting Chen Ding-nan (陳定南) for provincial governor. Other known earlier influences on Lai were Lin Yi-hsiung (林義雄), Loa Ho (賴和), Chiang Wei-shui (蔣渭水). See, biographical profile on Lai ([FTV](#), May 18, 2019).

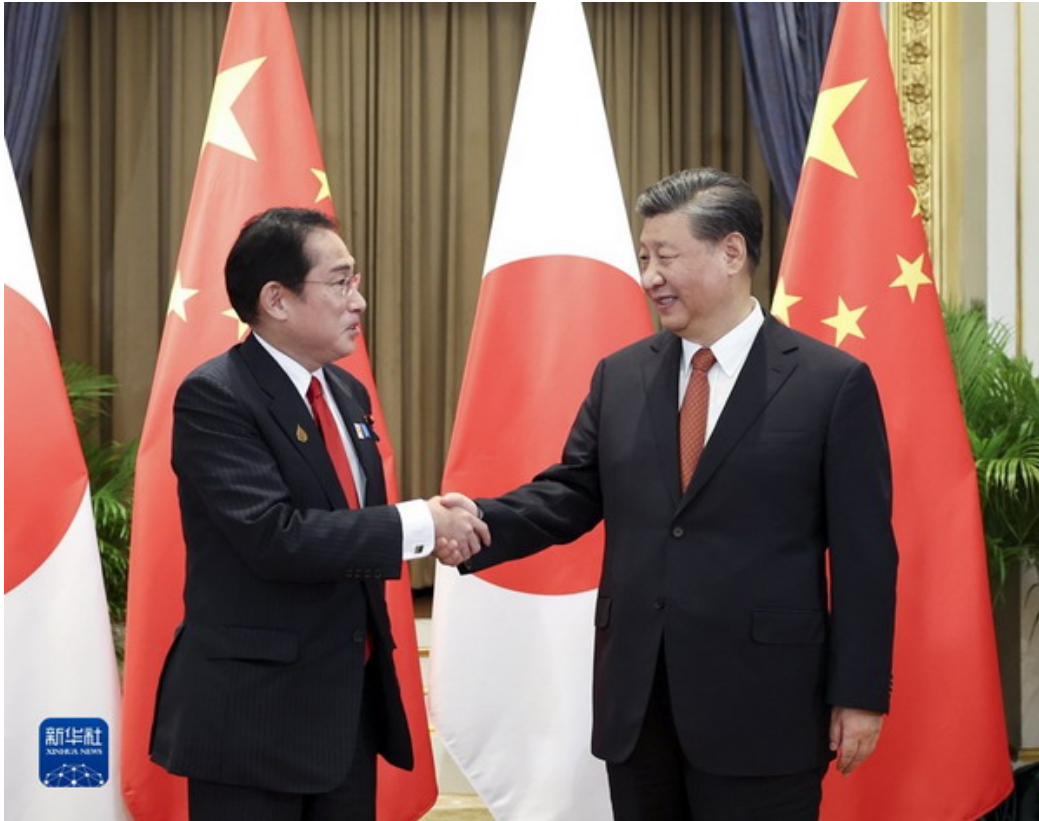
[2] In 2004, he was chosen to participate in the US Department of State’s International Visitor Leadership Program. (<https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/543>)

[3] See Ryan Hass, “[Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-wen enters second term with a strong political mandate, but no room for complacency](#),” Brookings, May 13, 2020.

[4] See Richard C. Bush, “[Taiwan’s democracy and the China challenge](#),” Brookings, January 21, 2021.

**Russia-Ukraine War Compels Japan to Reassess China Challenge, Shift Course on Security**

*Pavel K. Baev*



*(Image: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida shakes hands with Xi Jinping at their meeting in Bangkok in November, 2022, source: FMPRC)*

**Introduction**

Against the backdrop of the grisly Russia-Ukraine war, the security situation in East Asia may appear conducive to the continuation of the long peace that the region has enjoyed for decades. However, the devastating European war has cast a long shadow eastward. While Russia’s military presence in Asia is deeply curtailed as most of its conventional capabilities are redeployed to the Donbas front in Ukraine, the behavior of maverick North Korea has become more reckless and China’s policy has become less predictable and more assertive. As a result, Japan has adopted a more proactive approach to its international security environment predicated on enhancing its military capabilities and deepening security cooperation with key allies and partners, starting with, but not limited to, the U.S.

**Charting a New Security Course**

Japan's response to these aggravated security challenges is codified in the new National Security Strategy (NSS) approved in mid-December 2022 then elaborated in the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program ([Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan \[MOFA\]](#), December 27, 2022; [Japan Ministry of Defense](#), December 28, 2022). These documents contain few surprises, as the content was subject to many in-depth debates; yet, they constitute a major departure from the familiar patterns of cooperative relations with Japan's very different and often difficult neighbors ([ECFR](#), January 31).

The commitment to patient and persistent work aimed at resolving disagreements is deeply ingrained in Japanese strategic culture, so the recognition of the plain fact of irreconcilable conflict with the nuclearizing North Korea and war-bent Russia took no small amount of political courage. [1] Even more difficult is internalizing the prospect of irreducibly hostile relations with China, which has embraced strategic competition with the U.S. and constitutes a direct and growing threat to Japan's security interests ([Nikkei Asia](#), January 17). Indeed, such a course ensures continued criticism from Beijing that Tokyo enables and supports what the PRC foreign ministry describes as U.S. machinations to assemble "small blocs through its alliance system that "create division in the region, stoke confrontation and undermine peace" ([PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs \[FMPRC\]](#), February 20).

This shift in Japan's fundamental views on regional security is on par with Germany's abandonment of the political tradition of *Ostpolitik*, based on the assumption that cultivation of economic ties with the Soviet Union and then Russia would ensure a peaceful evolution of the European security system. The new German policy aimed at deterring and defeating aggressive Russia, which introduced into the political lexicon the term *Zeitenwende*, remains unstable and is even compared to the famous "Schrödinger's cat", which is presumed to be simultaneously alive and dead. [2] Japan's new course is by no means free of controversies, but it is charted unequivocally and firmly set.

### **Collective Security is Hard Work**

As Japan increases its defense budget and invests in new long-range capabilities, its leadership clearly understands that managing an increasingly challenging regional security environment also requires a collective effort. This emphasis on expanding ties with allies and partners aligns Tokyo with U.S. President Biden's big idea of building an alliance of democracies and the more specific goal of deterring China's expansionism through the combined efforts of all regional security stakeholders ([The White House](#), October 12, 2022). For Washington, the combined application of ideological and geopolitical frameworks to deal with China appears on the mark, but in order for the U.S. and its allies to successfully implement this approach, they must overcome multiple points of tension and even disagreements over how best to manage the challenge at hand ([South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](#), January 7).

One of the main concerns shared by Japan, as well as most of the other East Asian participants in the coalition of democracies, is the reliability of the U.S. commitment to the region. Few doubt the durability of the U.S.-China rivalry, but suspicions linger about a possible shift in attitude under the next U.S. administration toward regional allies. Moreover, these East Asian partners must also grapple with demands from Washington to enforce restrictions on economic ties with China, which affect trade and investment flows in Asia-Pacific ([Japan](#)



[Times](#), November 25, 2022). A larger issue is the prospect of an extended Russia-Ukraine war of attrition, which could force a shift in U.S. attention and military resources away from East Asia.

A key part of the solution to this problem is adding regional security links to the bilateral ties with the U.S., with the recently strengthened cooperation between Japan and the Philippines providing an excellent case in point ([Kyodo News](#), February 9). Moreover, Beijing has noted this increased bilateral cooperation with pronounced displeasure, which underscores its utility ([Global Times](#), February 13). Taiwan is also keen to upgrade its security relationships with Japan and South Korea, despite the constraints imposed by the firm adherence of both Tokyo and Seoul to “One China” policies ([Taipei Times](#), February 15). This ambivalence illustrates the difficulties in expanding regional networks, which are often deformed by old grievances, for instance, between Japan and South Korea.

Another challenge that East and Southeast Asian states must overcome in order to deepen regional security networks is integrating their differing security priorities. South Korea is heavily focused on the threat from North Korea, whereas the Philippines and Singapore are concentrated on tensions in the South China Sea. Japan finds itself in a multi-threat environment, with the Northern Territories in dispute with Russia, tensions with China in the East China Sea, the threat from North Korean nuclear-capable missiles and direct exposure to a potential conflict in the Taiwan Straits.

### **Russia: Weak Link and Wild Card**

China is also actively building out its own security networks by cultivating ties with Myanmar and recently making a major upgrade to its relationship with Iran ([China Daily](#), February 17). The main pillar of these connections is the strategic partnership with Russia, but this quasi-alliance may turn out to be a source of trouble rather than strength. Russia has for many years attempted to execute a “pivot to Asia”, but its economic profile has amounted merely to exports of oil and gas, mostly to China, so it has had to rely on demonstrations of military might to claim a prominent role in regional security. During the last year, a major part of its conventional capabilities, including the marine brigades of the Pacific Fleet, were redeployed to the Ukraine theater and have suffered heavy losses as a result ([Moscow Times](#), February 14).

Russia is keen to prove that its military profile is undiminished in the Pacific and has recently undertaken a series of joint naval exercises with China. In September, a combined naval squadron sailed through the Osumi Strait, which separates the southwestern tip of Kyushu from the Ryukyu Islands ([Nippon.com](#), September 30). In December, another joint China-Russia naval exercise was held in the East China Sea ([China Military Online](#), December 21, 2022). Russian long-range aviation, despite performing frequent combat missions against Ukraine, is also conducting Pacific patrols, sometimes together with Chinese H-6K strategic bombers ([Nikkei Asia](#), November 30). As worrisome as these demonstrations of military force are, they cannot conceal the severe degradation of the Russian defense-industrial complex and the lack of material support from China to its partner-in-need. Moscow was irked by the warning by State Secretary Antony Blinken regarding China’s considerations over providing “lethal support” to Russia, delivered at the 2023 Munich Security Conference ([TASS](#), February 19).

Moscow has tried to sustain an offensive push in Donbas, but the balance of forces is shifting against it as the Ukrainian army receives increasing amounts of modern weaponry from the West. The only hope for Russia to

alter these dynamics is for an escalation of conflicts in East Asia, which would force the U.S. to shift attention and military resources to the Pacific. Russian analysts express concern about the changes in Japan's defense policy and try to argue that financing the planned military build-up is a burden too heavy for the state budget. [3] Such wishful reflections cannot hide the desire to see a surge in tension between China and the U.S.-Japan alliance. For example, the recent crisis involving the Chinese intelligence balloon and other unidentified objects, which has roiled U.S.-China relations, has been monitored and amplified with acute interest in Moscow ([Kommersant](#), February 13).

Russia may find itself in an increasingly desperate situation as Ukraine prepares a spring counter-offensive. As a result, for the Kremlin, an escalation in the Pacific could become a practical necessity. Taiwan is generally beyond Russia's reach and triggering a clash around the Kuril islands could be self-defeating, but the small group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, known as Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, could present a useful target. The Japanese government took ownership over these islands in 2012 and took pains to explain to Beijing its reasons for that nationalization, but China still vehemently opposed the move and continues to contest Japanese administration of the islands ([Kyodo News](#), December 16, 2022). The meeting at the 2023 Munich Security Conference between Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and Wang Yi, Politburo member and senior-most PRC foreign policy official, could bring some reduction in tensions around the Senkaku/Diaoyu ([Japan MOFA](#), February 18). Nevertheless, Moscow could look for a chance to stage a "false flag" operation or another of the sort of "hybrid" provocations that it excels at.

### **Conclusion**

Time is a crucial resource for executing the planned changes in Japan's defense policy, but the dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine War have seemingly shortened the timeline for Tokyo to achieve its goals. The Japanese government needs to encourage every step taken by Xi Jinping in the direction of returning China to the trajectory of strong growth by luring back wary foreign investors and de-escalating conflicts with the U.S., Taiwan and Japan. Tokyo can count on the Biden administration, which seeks to balance firmly responding to persistent Chinese probes of its resolve with keeping competition with its main geo-economic rival on an even keel, doubling this encouragement. What Tokyo cannot count on is Xi Jinping's sustained preference for prosperity through normalizing regional interactions. The domestic economic situation in China is more uncertain than its leaders are prepared to admit, and another surge of public protests could prompt a high-level decision to resort to aggressive nationalism as a means of restoring control. Furthermore, the recent emphasis by Beijing on achieving "self-reliance in science and technology," which was the theme of the Politburo's most recent collective study session, underscores that the PRC is girding itself for long-term geopolitical competition with the West ([State Council Information Office](#), February 22).

The obvious lesson of the Russia-Ukraine war for Beijing is to reassess the strength of the Western alliance and to avoid brazen and costly experiments with projecting military power. However, the PRC can also draw less obvious lessons on the consolidation of autocratic control in the course of Russia's confrontation with the U.S.-led coalition. Europe must prepare for the grim prospect of a long war, but the best way to ensure a stable peace—and to reduce conflict potential in East Asia as well—may well go through helping Ukraine achieve a swift and decisive victory. President Volodymyr Zelensky presented this option at the 2023 Munich Security Conference, and it is by no means a stretch of his strategic imagination. Russia's defeat can be brought much

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closer than the delusional Kremlin expects, and Japan can contribute to joint efforts aimed at this rehabilitation of a rules-based world order.

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### **Notes**

[1] This observation is based in part on the author's recent research trip to Tokyo, where he (together with PRIO colleague Dr Ilaria Carrozza) held discussions with security experts at leading Japanese think tanks.

[2] See, Constanze Stelzenmüller, "[Germany's policy shift is real but still falls short](#)," *Financial Times*, February 13, 2023.

[3] See, Andrey Kortunov, "[Old Cold War type relations do not serve Japan](#)", Russian International Affairs Council, January 18, 2023.

**Ten Years On, How is the Belt and Road Initiative Faring in Indonesia?**

*William Yuen Yee*



**(Image: The Virtue Dragon Nickel Industry Park, a BRI project in Southeast Sulawesi Province of Indonesia , source: Global Times)**

**Introduction**

“It is not merely talk, but it is about actually building something. From airports to railways, these are industries we can see and touch. This is exactly the sort of courage and real action the world needs right now.” So said Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo about China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at the inaugural Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in 2017 ([BRF](#), May 14, 2017; [Jakarta Globe](#), May 16, 2017). This year marks the tenth anniversary of this ambitious, globe-spanning infrastructure development project. Today, 151 countries and 32 international organizations have joined the initiative, which Foreign Minister Qin Gang recently described as a “global enterprise to build a belt of prosperity and a road to happiness” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China \[PRC\]](#), January 20).

A decade ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the BRI with a series of speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia calling for a “Silk Road Economic Belt” and a “Maritime Silk Road,” respectively ([Consulate General of the PRC in Toronto](#), September 7, 2013; [China Daily](#), October 4, 2013). The following year, China announced the creation of a \$40 billion Silk Road fund at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing and a \$20 billion Maritime Silk Road fund in Indonesia ([China Daily](#), November 9, 2014).

From the BRI’s inception, it has been clear that Southeast Asia and its largest economy— Indonesia—are intended to serve as a centerpiece of the megaproject ([Global Times](#), November 16, 2022). Roughly two-thirds

of all people of ethnic Chinese ancestry outside of China are in Southeast Asia. [1] The 142-kilometer (88 mile) Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway (HSR) is one of the BRI's flagship projects ([China Brief](#), December 22, 2022). Indonesia also hosts nearly half of the eight overseas industrial parks that China has established across the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states: the China-Indonesia Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, the China-Indonesia Morowali Industrial Park, and the China-Indonesia JuLong Agricultural Industry Cooperation Zone ([China Development Institute](#), June 26, 2019).

While Beijing has pulled back its overseas BRI lending—and Xi has exhibited some notable reticence toward hosting a third Belt and Road Forum—Indonesia challenges the broader narrative that the BRI is somehow fading away ([Green Finance & Development Center](#), July 24, 2022). In the world's fourth-most populous country, Chinese investment has continued apace, and both governments continue to champion the BRI's ability to deliver “mutual benefit” and “win-win results.” Still, understanding Indonesia's experience with the BRI requires closer examination of the history behind China-Indonesia infrastructure cooperation, major projects beyond the oft-discussed Jakarta-Bandung HSR and their impacts on the Indonesian public, and the extent of economic engagement between Jakarta and Beijing.

### **If You Build It, They Will Come**

In Indonesia, Beijing has practiced the kind of “infrastructure diplomacy” at the heart of the BRI since 2008. Previously, Chinese foreign policy officials had focused on pursuing mutual connectivity projects within the frameworks of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Central Asia and the ASEAN Plus Three (10 ASEAN member states, plus China, Japan, and South Korea) in Southeast Asia. In 2010, then-Premier Wen Jiabao visited Indonesia and announced that China would provide \$1 billion in concessionary loans and \$8 billion in development financing ([China Daily](#), May 1, 2011). The following year, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhono and Premier Wen signed a joint communique in which Jakarta “welcomed the participation of Chinese enterprises in infrastructure development” and strengthened “cooperation on the development of Indonesian economic corridors” ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#)).

In November 2014, Jokowi unveiled the Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF), a strategy to leverage Indonesia's strategic location in the Indo-Pacific and status as the world's largest archipelagic state in order to prioritize maritime connectivity and infrastructure development. Both Xi's BRI and Jokowi's GMF emphasize infrastructure development. In March 2015, the two leaders agreed to prioritize the development of the Jakarta-Bandung HSR ([China Daily](#), March 30, 2019). In 2017, Indonesia became one of 27 countries at the first Belt and Road Forum to endorse Beijing's “Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road,” which called for prioritizing “infrastructure connectivity” and development of “natural resources,” among other things ([PRC Ministry of Finance](#); [Xinhuanet](#), May 15, 2017).

One year later, the two governments inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that affirmed a “strategic alignment” between China's BRI and Indonesia's GMF ([Coordinating Ministry for Maritime & Investment Affairs](#), May 14, 2019). The Jakarta-Bandung HSR represented the “first stage” of this “strategic alignment,” and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Corridor exemplified the “second stage” ([The Jakarta Post](#), August 23, 2019). Then, at the 2019 G20 Summit in Japan, Jokowi asked Xi for a special low-interest BRI fund to facilitate Chinese investment in Indonesia, to which the Chinese leader agreed ([Antara News](#), July 2, 2019).



### **All That Glitters Is Not Gold**

Today, robust BRI cooperation between Beijing and Jakarta persists. Last year, Indonesia was the third-largest recipient country of Chinese investments with about \$560 million, trailing only Saudi Arabia (\$5.5 billion) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (\$600 million) ([Green Finance & Development Center](#), July 2022). Indonesia boasts the world's third-most BRI infrastructure projects, behind Cambodia and Pakistan ([AidData](#), September 2021). However, the Indonesian government's enthusiasm for Chinese investment and BRI projects is not always matched by the public. While much has already been written about the flagship Jakarta-Bandung HSR, less attention has been devoted to Indonesia's 70 other ongoing BRI projects. This piece will focus on two: the Regional Comprehensive Economic Corridor and the industrial parks of the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" scheme.

In 2018, both governments signed an MoU to develop the Regional Comprehensive Economic Corridor ([Antara News](#), May 7, 2018). At the second Belt and Road Forum in April 2019, Indonesia proposed 28 projects worth \$91.1 billion for the wide-ranging project ([Badan Koordinasi Penanaman Modal](#), accessed February 6). Currently, the plan comprises four locations on Indonesia's periphery—North Sumatra, North Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, and Bali, which aligns with Jokowi's oft-touted objective to develop the archipelago's outer provinces. In these regions, China has opened industrial parks, metallurgical and power plants, and tourism facilities.

One such project is the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi, which has fueled Indonesia's rise to become the world's second-largest stainless steel producer, churning out 3 million tons of stainless steel each year ([Embassy of the PRC in Indonesia](#), March 27, 2019). The park is a joint venture between China's Tsingshan Group and Indonesia's Bintang Delapan Group that sprawls over a 3,200-hectare site designed to develop integrated nickel-content stainless steel production. Since construction started in 2013, the area now boasts 11 smelters and \$18 billion in overall investments from different companies.

But all that glitters is not gold. Nine of Indonesia's BRI projects, worth a total of \$5.2 billion, involve scandals, controversies, or alleged violations—the world's second-most, behind only Pakistan ([AidData](#), September 2021). Morowali provides an illuminating example: The Chinese-built industrial complex has fueled misinformation about mass influxes of Chinese workers, triggering tensions with local Indonesians and degrading the PRC's reputation. In February 2020, two screenshots of Indonesian media reports falsely claiming that Morowali employed 40,000 foreign Chinese workers were shared nearly 2,000 times on Twitter and Facebook ([Twitter](#), February 6, 2020). In reality, Morowali's 43,000 employees at the time included 38,000 Indonesian citizens and 5,000 workers from China ([Straits Times](#), January 31, 2020). As of today, the industrial park employs 70,000 Indonesian workers ([People's Daily](#), November 17, 2022). Nevertheless, perceptions, even when they diverge from reality, matter.

In January, escalating racial tensions between employees at a nickel smelter in Morowali turned deadly, causing the deaths of one Chinese and one Indonesian worker, and many more injuries ([Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Indonesia](#), January 17). Previously, hundreds of local Indonesian workers had staged rallies and strikes, as well as burning heavy machinery and vehicles, to protest the rumored attack by Chinese workers on a colleague. Afterward, Indonesia's national police chief said that the smelter—which employs over 1,000 skilled Chinese laborers—would increase the number of Indonesian workers from 11,000 to 30,000 ([Jakarta](#)

[Globe](#), January 16). The tragedy underscores the fragile and tense person-to-person relations between Indonesia and China, which are a stark contrast to close state-to-state ties.

Furthermore, the success of Indonesian stainless steel products—fueled by Beijing’s investments in such industrial parks—has ironically transformed the Southeast Asian nation into a primary rival for domestic-made products in China. In July 2018, the Chinese government launched an anti-dumping investigation into imported stainless steel worth \$1.3 billion, which included Indonesian products ([Ministry of Industry Indonesia](#), November 5, 2018). In response, Indonesia extended anti-dumping import duties of up to 20 percent for different flat-rolled iron and steel products from seven countries, including China ([GNV Consulting](#), September 16, 2019).

The new "Two Countries, Twin Parks" scheme remains a work in progress. In January 2021, both countries affirmed their commitments in an MoU, pledging to develop interconnected business sectors in industrial parks. Indonesia’s ambassador to Beijing has described it as “one of the national priority projects” under the BRI and GMF ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia](#), September 20, 2022). Beijing selected the Yuanhong Investment Zone in Fujian, while Jakarta chose three estates: Bintan Industrial Estate, Aviarna Industrial Estate and Batang Industrial Estate ([PRC Ministry of Commerce](#), March 25, 2021). The ongoing project boasts some 36 investment projects in the Fujian area with a value of 19.8 billion RMB (\$2.8 billion), including ports, logistic systems, food inspection service centers, a joint China-Indonesia R&D center for seafood, and a joint Sino-Indonesian bank ([Antara News](#), November 22, 2022). Only time will tell what the future holds for this project.

### **Surging Trade and Investment**

In addition to large-scale infrastructure projects, the BRI has also transformed Indonesia’s economic engagement with China. Today, Beijing has been Indonesia’s largest trading partner for ten consecutive years ([Global Times](#), November 15, 2022).

It was not always like this. In 2013, Chinese FDI in the Southeast Asian nation totaled just \$300 million, and Beijing was Indonesia’s ninth-largest foreign investor, trailing Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, the U.S., and even Taiwan ([Centre for Strategic and International Studies \[Jakarta\]](#), January 1, 2019). Since Xi launched the BRI in 2013, however, annual flows of Chinese investment into Indonesia have soared. In 2016, China leapt into third place with \$2.7 billion in FDI. By the fourth quarter of 2019, China overtook Singapore to become the nation with the largest foreign investment in Indonesia ([Indonesia Investment Coordinating Board](#), accessed February 6). In the first half of 2022, Chinese investment in Indonesia totaled \$3.6 billion ([Bisnis](#), July 27, 2022).

That said, this surge of loans and foreign direct investment into Indonesia does not come without potential consequences. Indonesia’s debt to Chinese creditors continues to climb, reaching \$22.01 billion in March 2022 ([South China Morning Post](#), June 12, 2022). Still, to describe Indonesia as locked in a Chinese “debt trap” is an overstatement. Indonesia’s sovereign debt exposure to China between 2000-2017 amounted to zero percent of GDP, while its “hidden debt exposure”—an estimate that aims to compensate for the chronic underreporting of Chinese loans—is around two percent of GDP ([AidData](#), September 2021).

### **All We Know Is That We Know Nothing**

Ten years after Xi launched the Maritime Silk Road in Indonesia, Jakarta's commitment to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative is steadfast. "The Indonesia-China cooperation is not only beneficial to Indonesians and Chinese, but also to all the peoples of East Asia," said Jusuf Wanandi, a Sino-Indonesian politician who co-founded the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies think tank ([Mission of the People's Republic of China to the EU](#), August 11, 2022).

Moreover, Beijing looks well-positioned to assist Jakarta in the latter's mission to achieve its grand centenary objectives. Under Vision 2045, Indonesia aims to become a "sovereign, fair, and prosperous country" on the 100th anniversary of its independence ([Indonesia Development Forum](#), May 14, 2019). By then, the Southeast Asian nation seeks to become one of the world's top five economies with a total GDP of \$7 trillion, an annual GDP per capita of \$320 million rupiah (\$22,807), and to have reduced the poverty rate to just 0.2 percent ([Global Times](#), October 27, 2019). The question is not whether China will assist Indonesia with attaining this vision, but the extent to which Beijing will be involved. "Without [infrastructure], don't ever dream of Indonesia progressing to be a country with the world's fourth or fifth economy," Jokowi has said ([Benar News](#), May 9, 2019).

Right now, Jakarta clearly recognizes the role of Chinese-led infrastructure projects in its national development. Yet the government's optimism toward the BRI underestimates the divide between elite and public attitudes in Indonesia on the initiative. Such tight-knit cooperation between both governments must deliver results that convince skeptical Indonesian citizens to overlook the BRI's manifold setbacks and embrace its benefits. A decade into its launch, whether China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative will engender the positive outcomes that it has promised in Indonesia, particularly to the local public—and upon which Jakarta has pinned many of its development hopes—remains to be seen.

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### **Notes**

[1] See Kevin Rudd, [The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China](#) (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).

## The CCTV Spring Festival Gala: A Cultural Showcase Loses its Luster

Sheldon Xie



(Image: The opening performance of the 2023 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, source: CCTV)

### Introduction

Every year on Lunar New Year's Eve, people all over China gather around the television with hot dumplings to watch the China Central Television (CCTV) *Chunwan* (春晚)—Spring Festival Gala. Ever since the CCTV Spring Festival Gala was first broadcast in 1983, the *Chunwan* has profoundly altered how Chinese people celebrate the Lunar New Year. The Spring Festival Gala serves not only as a medium of cultural entertainment on this traditional Chinese holiday but as an educational and propaganda platform to convey authoritative information to an engaged national audience ([Guangming Daily](#), February 1). However, at the 40th anniversary of CCTV's first *Chunwan*, this grand showcase to ring in the Lunar New Year has gradually lost popularity among Chinese people. The program sticks too heavily to the Chinese government's political agenda and as a result, the current iteration of *Chunwan* comes across as a magnificent but hollow performance. Perhaps the starkest reminder of this was that the 2023 program complete glossed over the Chinese people's past three-year ordeal of COVID-19 and Zero-COVID lockdowns ([CCTV](#), January 23).

### Reform Era Origins

*Chunwan* was born at the outset of the Reform and Opening Up era. During the early 1980s, China had just started holistic economic reforms, turning its focus to prioritizing economic development beginning with the



Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1978 and Deng Xiaoping's ascent to the de facto, paramount leadership role. This turning point had a profound impact on Chinese peoples' social and cultural lives. Moreover, with the growing popularity of television in the 1980s, people in China demanded a new form of entertainment on the screens in their homes. Therefore, in the literary and artistic fields, CCTV developed an evolved modern version of the Gala to celebrate the Lunar New Year—incorporating singing, dancing, Peking Opera, and comedy sketches—and broadcast the whole show live to a nationwide audience.

During the first two decades of the Spring Festival Gala broadcast, the performances were intended to be more entertaining than instructive, thanks to the relatively loose and liberalized atmosphere of the Reform Era 1980s. For example, the TV executives of *Chunwan* even proposed a suggestion to invite the TV audience to participate in a live broadcast of the Gala by calling the Gala main desk to request their favorite songs or shows during the first couple of years of *Chunwan* ([Sohu](#), January 31, 2022). Even during the 1990s, when the repertoire of the Gala was mainly regularized and scrutinized by the CCTV headquarters, the director team of the Gala still left some allowance and freedom for the contents of artistic performances at *Chunwan*. The shows, particularly the comedy sketches, even often touched lightly on the “political redlines” of PRC authorities. As a result, in the 1980s to 1990s, many Chinese people came to appreciate *Chunwan*'s somewhat sharp caricatures critiquing sociopolitical phenomena, from the One Child Policy and bureaucratic corruption ([Sohu](#), January 22; [Sina](#), June 3, 2020). In short, performances based on real life in China resonated with people, giving them a chance to be entertained and, after laughing, perhaps even reflect on real societal problems.

### **Dancing with Shackles On**

In recent years, the entertainment appeal of *Chunwan* has faded. Instead, the annual gala has come to serve a more propagandistic and instructive role in a cultural environment that has been characterized by tighter ideological control and diminished space for artistic creation since the promulgation of CCP Document No.9 a decade ago. [1] As a result, directors, screenwriters, and other artistic creators involved in producing *Chunwan* are increasingly focused on self-censoring any content that could be perceived as political sensitivity in the eyes of the authorities. For these reasons, this year's *Chunwan* went through as many as five joint rehearsals to facilitate the deletion of any politically sensitive content and to edit out any inappropriate program content ([Global Times](#), January 19). This ensures that there are no unexpected “accidents” during the live broadcast.

In recent years, dialogues, including the comedy sketches in *Chunwan*, have been reduced and the proportion of singing and dancing programs featuring popular Chinese stars has increased, as the Spring Festival Gala directors likely see this as the safest, least political, and hence least risky content. The *Chunwan* comedy sketches in particular are becoming more instructive and propagandistic, echoing the slogans or programs of the CCP Central Propaganda Department (CPD, 中宣部) and CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI, 中纪委).

A prominent example in this year's *Chunwan* is one of the comedy sketches, “The Pit” (《坑》), which portrays a so-called “lying-flat cadre” (躺平式干部), a local official, who shirks responsibility for responding to



residents' petitions and always makes excuses for himself ([CCTV](#), January 21). While the actors in this comedy sketch are amusing, the criticism of the cadres' "inaction" (不作为) comes off as superficial. The whole performance seems like a propositional essay for the Party apparatus on the need to rectify "bureaucracy" (官僚主义) and "formalism" (形式主义). Although the CCDI has applauded this comedy sketch in its commentary ([CCDI](#), January 22), this hardly suggests the Party is focused on addressing the negative influence of party members' "inaction" on the common Chinese people, e.g., local officials shirking responsibility during the Zero-COVID lockdowns. Rather, such performances serve as a megaphone to reinforce the Party's "anti-bureaucracy" agenda and propagandist messaging.



The comedy sketch, *The Pit* (《坑》), portrays the "lying-flat cadre" in the 2023 Spring Festival Gala (Source: [CCTV](#))

### The Party's "Year-End Summary"

For decades, *Chunwan* has provided the Chinese people with an official "year-end summary" (年终总结) of the previous twelve months. The tradition is to enumerate China's recent tragedies and triumphs by directly or indirectly referencing major events, from the 1998 floods to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, through the various gala performances and skits.

Notably, these significant events, no matter how traumatic or glorious for China, would be meticulously mentioned in the scripts from either Gala's emcees or actors, which struck a chord among nationwide Chinese people since they had clear feelings and fresh memories of what happened in their lives. However, in a break from this tradition, during this year's Spring Festival Gala, the whole *Chunwan* show rarely reflected on or even mentioned the suffering of the Chinese people during the constant Zero-COVID lockdowns in 2022. This also

reflects a dramatic shift away from the Party's own rhetoric throughout much of the past several years on the need to achieve victory in the struggle to “defeat the epidemic” ([People.cn](#), November 28, 2022). The 2023 *Chunwan* reveals that the Party wants to totally turn the page on the struggles that Chinese people have experienced in the past three years since COVID-19 occurred, as if nothing has happened. The goal is to create the illusion for the Chinese people of a bright future with pleasant expectations ([Xinhua](#), January 22).

Of course, ever since Xi stepped into office, the *Chunwan* also made its adjustments in consonance with the tighter ideological environment. As a result, since 2014, *Chunwan* has earned the reputation of the “question bank” for the politics subject test in both the college entrance examination (高考) and the national civil service examination (国家公务员考试), as most of the themes of the *Chunwan* performances could be associated with CCP guidelines or governmental policies in areas such as culture, agriculture, climate change, social welfare, ideological work, etc. ([Zhejiang News](#), February 5, 2017). In this sense, all *Chunwan* performances carry out a critical political mission to demonstrate the wise Party leadership in launching correct policies and thereafter making achievements in various domains in the past year. To make a long story short, the performances of *Chunwan* aim to “tell China's story well” (讲好中国故事) year by year—definitely through the Party's narrative.

### **Conclusion**

After 40 years of live broadcasts, the Spring Festival Gala has already deviated from its original intention of entertaining the public and celebrating the Lunar New Year. As the programming becomes more politicized and propagandistic, audiences are starting to tune out. This year's CCTV Spring Festival Gala ratings dropped to an 8-year low of 20.23 percent, compared to the highest telecast audience ratings (41.6 percent) in 2004 ([CCTV](#), January 22; [Tencent Net](#), February 2, 2019). Nevertheless, the number of people streaming the show online hit a record high. However, nowadays, many people do not pay as close attention to *Chunwan* on New Year's Eve as they did in the past. Instead, more and more Chinese people regard it as the background sound to Lunar New Year's Eve celebrations with family and friends ([RFI](#), February 23, 2015). In the coming years, the Spring Festival Gala will likely only become more encumbered by its political shackles. Therefore, *Chunwan* still faces serious challenges in terms of winning over people's popularity as an entertaining cabaret and carrying out political missions as a crucial propaganda platform.

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### **Notes**

[1] For an English translation, see “[Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation.](#)” *ChinaFile*, November 8, 2013.