

INDSR Newsletter



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The Institute for National Defense and Security Research (財團法人國防安全研究院) is dedicated to fueling knowledge-based policy analyses and strategic assessments on Taiwan's security.

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Standing With Taiwan: Lithuania Hit By China's Media Maneuvers

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1. News Highlights

On November 28, 2021, Matas Maldeikis, Chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament's Friendship Group with Taiwan, led a delegation of the country's parliamentarians to Taiwan to participate in the "2021 Open Parliament Forum" and to meet President Tsai Ing-wen. It was the culmination of a breakthrough in Taiwan-Lithuania relations: On March 23, the Lithuanian government proposed to its

parliament to amend legislation in order to station a commercial representative in Taiwan; On July 20, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it would establish a representative office in Lithuania; Between October 26-29, a Taiwan economic and investment delegation visited Lithuania and signed six memoranda of cooperation, including on semiconductors; On November 18, the "Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania" was officially established.¹

1. Lithuanian legislators arrive in Taiwan, see "Lithuanian Parliamentary Delegation Visits Taiwan to Participate in Open Parliament Forum," *Public TV News*, November 28, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/Mk5LpW>; Lithuanian legislators visited President Tsai Ing-wen, see "Lithuanian Parliamentary Delegation: This Trip to Taiwan Shows Unity," *Central News Agency*, November 29, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/958gEj>; Lithuania announces it will set up a commercial office in Taiwan, see "Lithuania Amends Law to Take One Step Further Toward Establishing an Office in Taiwan," *Central News Agency*, March 25, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/jgZ2dm>; Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announces it will establish a representative office in Taiwan in Lithuania, see "Taiwan Will Establish a Representative Office in Lithuania, Opening a New Page of Cooperation," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan, July 20, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/n5d29X>; Taiwan Economic and Trade Mission to Lithuania, see "Central Eastern Europe Economic and Trade Mission to Lithuania Creates New Milestone for Taiwan-Lithuania Economic and Trade Cooperation," National Development Council of Taiwan, 2021 October 28, <https://reurl.cc/Krak1M>; Taiwan Representative Office in Lithuania was established, see "Taiwan Representative Office in Lithuania Officially Established for Bilateral Cooperation to Open a New Page," *Central News Agency*, November 18, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/jgZ2dm>.

In response, the CCP imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions, including suspending railroad passenger transportation, halting the issuance of food export licenses, and canceling negotiations on agricultural and livestock products, in an attempt to coerce Lithuania to change its decision. On August 10, the Chinese Foreign Ministry recalled its ambassador to Lithuania and asked the latter to recall its ambassador in China. On November 21, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced it was downgrading the relations between the two countries to the level of chargé d'affaires.² In addition to the multi-level political and economic coercion exerted on Lithuania, the CCP also strengthened the effect with media manipulation (see the attached figure). This article focuses on the CCP's different media manipulation strategies, both internally and externally, and explores their possible impact on relations between the two countries.

2. Security Implications

2-1. Propaganda strategy to let out internal pressure

The CCP has placed the highest priority on internal propaganda in order to solidify its authority. In the face of diplomatic defeats, the CCP has continued to escalate its rhetorical threats against Lithuania to provide an outlet on pressure in response to rising nationalism in the country. For example, after Lithuania publicized that it was strengthening relations with Taiwan in March, the CCP convergence media kept silent about it due to the sensitivity of the matter. It was not until July when Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs brought up the issue that the CCP published "A serious warning to the DPP authorities: colluding with external forces to provoke 'Taiwan independence' will only be self-defeating" and pointed out that "the responsibility for Taiwan relationship issues is completely

2. For the CCP's economic coercion of Lithuania, see "China Extends Retaliation to Lithuania for Cutting Orders, Canceling Negotiations on Agricultural and Livestock Deals," *Central News Agency*, August 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/GbyYI3>; China's Foreign Ministry recalls its ambassador to Lithuania, see "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Speaks on China's Decision to Recall Ambassador to Lithuania", *People's Daily Online*, August 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/2oGOWn>; the Chinese Foreign Ministry downgraded diplomatic relations with Lithuania, see "China Decides to Downgrade Diplomatic Relations to Chargé d'affaires Level," *People's Daily Online*, November 22, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/EZlvDA>.

in Lithuania”. When the establishment of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania was finalized, the CCP convergence media issued emotional comments such as “Lithuania will pay the price for betraying trust and justice” and “Lithuania has made a mistake but is still full of excuses.”³

Secondly, the CCP propagates conspiracy theory. To divert from its own ineffective governance. The CCP encouraged its convergence media and Internet influencers to spread bias and misinformation that attributed Lithuania’s diplomatic behavior to a political conspiracy. For example, the CCP cited suspicious information sources to report that “Lithuania is part of the global ‘black jail network’ of the US”, alleging that the US had transferred Muslim terrorist suspects to the “black prisons”

in Lithuania. This has been spread on the Chinese internet in many forms, including news reports, short videos, quick answers, and satirical cartoons. After the establishment of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania, the social media hashtag “#Lithuania_violently_treat_refugees_with_military_force_and_dogs” was pushed by the CCP convergence media and made its way to become a “hot search” on Weibo with numerous persuasive posts of violent images from unknown sources.⁴

2-2. Relatively restrained external propaganda strategy

The CCP’s foreign propaganda content, on the other hand, has been deliberately selected to curry favorable international opinions. Take China Global Television Network (CGTN), the foreign-

3. The CCP convergence media’s remarks on Taiwan’s relations with Lithuania, “A Serious Warning to the DPP Authorities: Colluding with External Forces to Provoke ‘Taiwan Independence’ Will Only be Self-defeating,” *Xinhua*, August 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/xEmQOV>; “The Responsibility for the Taiwan Relationship Issues is Completely in Lithuania,” *People’s Daily Online*, September 17, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/EZORpR>; “Lithuania Will Pay the Price for Betraying the Trust and Justice,” *Xinhua Net*, November 19, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/dxMGxg>; “Lithuania Has Made a Mistake but is Still Full of Excuses,” *Xinhua Net*, November 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/zWaNY6>.

4. CCP manipulation of conspiracy theories, “Lithuania is a Part of US Overseas ‘Black Jail Network’”, *Xinhua*, November 24, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/Q6qbZ9>; “#Lithuania_violently_treat_refugees_with_military_force_and_dogs”, *Weibo*, November 22, 2021, https://weibo.com/a/hot/ce2cb0db7583990c_0.html?type=grab.

language news network of CCTV, as an example: the CCP's foreign propaganda has been quite restrained with fewer relevant news than domestic ones; the CGTN also did not follow the CCTV to translate offensive comments such as "Lithuania's treachery is detestable, and its sophistry is pathetic", but chose to publish more rational comments instead such as "Lithuania's security must not be at the cost of China's interest". In addition, the Facebook page of the CCP's Haixia Daobao (Strait Herald), which is dedicated to propaganda on Taiwan, did not mention a single word about Lithuania and Taiwan-related news, and this shows that the CCP's external propaganda is different from the domestic one, and tries to downplay unfavorable issues.⁵

The CCP's media operation also uses the words of Lithuanian experts to endorse it. For example, the article "Lithuania is in

danger" published by *CCTV.com* quoted a so-called Russian newspaper "Free Press" as saying that "the Lithuanian government has driven itself into a dead end" and claimed to quote the deputy chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament's Economic Committee as saying that "less than a year from its establishment, the new Lithuanian government is already at war on many diplomatic fronts". The author also claimed to interview one of the "Lithuanian Independence Act" signatories who emphasized that "Lithuania does not have an independent foreign policy and is willing to be a pawn of the US" while quote a member of the Lithuanian Science Council as saying that "the Lithuanian government shows a tendency to 'go against the people'". These all aim to undermine the Lithuanian government's foreign policy.⁶

5. The remarks of the CCP's convergence media concerning Taiwan's relations with Lithuania, Lithuania's Treachery is Detestable, and Its Sophistry is Pathetic," *CCTV.com*, November 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/em2OLx>; John Gong, "Lithuania's Security Mustn't be At the Cost of China's Interest," *CGTN*, November 23, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/82m10X>.

6. For the CCP using endorsement from local experts, see "Lithuania is in Danger," *CCTV*, August 21, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/82ap0R>.

3. Trend Observation

3-1. China's cultural infiltration into Lithuania becomes concern

As discussed above, to counter Lithuania's strengthened relationship with Taiwan, the CCP takes a coercive approach, but its media operation inside China is different from that outside China. Similarly, the CCP also handles economic issues with Lithuania with both soft and hard measures. After Lithuania announced its withdrawal from the 17+1 cooperation between China and Central/Eastern European (CEE) countries, the CCP levered economic retaliation on Lithuania while, on the other hand, continued to publicize the benefits of its economic and trade cooperation with other European countries through its convergence media, highlighting the economic gains Lithuania was missing out on. It's obvious that the CCP has been using a "stick and carrot" strategy on Lithuania. It is also worth

noting that, aside from threats, the CCP is also making use of sugarcoating the tactics of influencing with money, power, and cultural exchange. For example, the Confucius Institute has taken root at Lithuania's Vilnius University since 2010. Not only Chinese language and qigong courses are offered, but also annual summer camps for high school and university students, Confucius Institute scholarships, and convergence media coverage on every local Chinese language competition by China's convergence media.⁷ The CCP's long-term cultural infiltration in Lithuania may serve as the basis for media manipulation and future social divergence.

3-2. CCP's media manipulation may intensify Lithuania's anti-China sentiment

Although the CCP takes different approaches for inside and outside the country on media operations in terms of

7. Lithuania announces withdrawal from China 17+1, "Lithuania Withdraws From China 17+1 Cooperation, Calls on EU Countries to Follow up," *Central News Agency*, May 24, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/YjA9gl>. For more information on the results of economic cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European countries, see "Working Together to Create a Better Future for China: Central and Eastern Europe Economic and Trade Cooperation," *People's Daily Online*, June 10, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/ye3rR2>; for the activities of the Confucius Institute in Lithuania, see the official website of the Confucius Institute at Vilnius University, <https://reurl.cc/n58O7n>; for the Chinese language competition in Lithuania promoted by CCP, see "Lithuania Holds Online 'Chinese Language Bridge'," *People's Daily Online*, May 8, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/bnOEV6>.

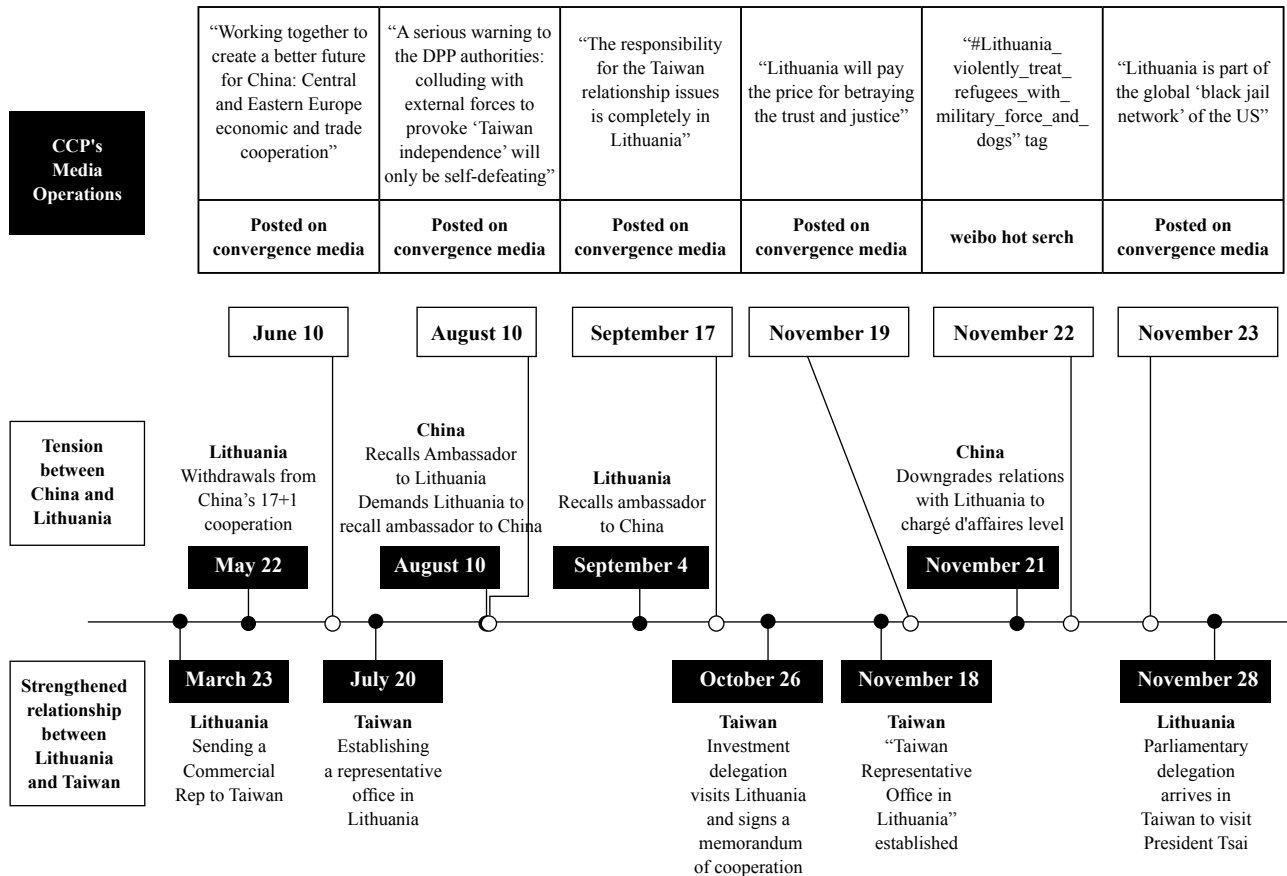
Lithuania's relations with Taiwan, this distinction is difficult to maintain on the global Internet where information flows freely. Once the internal nationalism is ignited, the CCP may have to show its "fighting posture" and become even more aggressive to the outside world. This would eventually affect its foreign policy maneuvers and put it in a difficult position. For example, the editorial "Let's talk straight about Lithuania" published by the CCP's *Huanqiu Network* is essentially internal propaganda, but its content is extremely denigrating and humiliating to Lithuania. Not only does it refer to Lithuania as a small country, but also uses words such as "mosquito", "rat" and "flea" to describe the country. "You may be threatened and denigrated in Chinese media headlines, but those you can resist," said Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, indicating the spillover effect of the CCP's internal propaganda.⁸ This is likely to aggravate resentment of the Lithuanian public

against China and is not conducive to the CCP's expectation that Lithuania will change its mind.

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8. The CCP's convergence media commented on Lithuania, "Let's Talk Straight About Lithuania," *Huanqiu Network*, November 21, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/YjaXEX>; the Lithuanian foreign minister made a statement, "Lithuania's Foreign Minister Believes the Country Has Set an Example for the World in Resisting Pressure From China," *RFI*, November 25, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/OkY4R7>.

Timeline of Lithuania's Strengthened Relations with Taiwan and CCP's Media Operations



Source/diagram: from publicly available information compiled by Shu-Ting Liu

Standing With Taiwan: Lithuania Hit By China's Media Maneuvers



Construction of Xi Jinping's "New Development Concept" and its Challenges

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1. News Highlights

On Dec. 2, 2021, Xi Jinping hosted a forum for non-party members convened by the CCP Central Committee in Zhongnanhai to listen to the views of representatives from all other so-called democratic parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce as well as non-party members on the economic situation in 2021 and future works in 2022. Xi emphasized in his speech at the meeting that the 20th Party Congress will be held next year... we will insist on the general keynote of seeking progress in a stable manner to fully, accurately and comprehensively implement the 'New Development

Concept'; and we will accelerate the construction of a new development pattern, comprehensively deepen reform and opening, and promote high-quality development".¹ The subsequent Economic Work Conference of the CCP Central Committee held from December 8-10 also summarized China's economic development in 2021 and echoed the "New Development Concept", which represents the CCP's top guiding ideology for the next stage of its overall development towards the 20th National Congress and beyond, making Xi's concept as the top guiding ideology for the next phase. The goals of its construction and possible future challenges will be discussed in this article.

1. "The Central Committee of the CCP Convened a Forum of Non-party Members to Solicit Views and Suggestions on Economic Work," *People's Daily Online*, December 7, 2021. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1207/c1024-32301095.html>.

2. Security Implications

2-1. The "New Development Concept" reveals long-standing problems of China's reform

As an important historical document of the CCP, "The Resolution of the Central Committee of the CCP on the Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party's Centennial Struggle" (the "Centennial Resolution") adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 19th CCP Central Committee held from November 8-11, 2021, also pays special attention to the "New Development Concept". It says that "the new development concept... cannot be simply judged by the GDP growth rate. It must also achieve high-quality development with innovation as the first driving force, coordination as an endogenous feature, green environment to become prevalent, openness as the way to go, and sharing as the fundamental purpose to promote transformation in economic development in qualitative, efficient and dynamic ways."² In other

words, the next stage of the CCP's development after its centennial will start from correcting the shortcomings of the "GDP-first" ideology and reversing the past problems of sacrificing the environment and quality only for mass production. The new direction that leads China's future development must be comprehensive and diversified, and economic growth should no longer be the only criterion of political success.

The Economic Work Conference of the Central Committee of the CCP held from December 8-19, 2021, emphasized the "four imperatives", which include insisting on the centralized and unified leadership of the CCP Central Committee, high-quality development, stable progress, and strengthened coordination and planning. In terms of new development, it requires that "we cannot walk the old path in new shoes, no more bluffing or creating the path carelessly. We must fully, accurately, and comprehensively implement the New Development Concept to construct a new development pattern

2. "The Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experiences of the Party's Centennial Struggle," *People's Daily Online*, November 17, 2021. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1117/c1001-32284266.html>.

and promote high-quality development.”³ As mentioned, the CCP authorities see that the long-standing problem of the past is the scratchy development and the waste of resources caused by the blind investments just for the sake of growth; so it is necessary to centralize and coordinate resource allocation in economic affairs through the CCP in order to solve the long-standing problem of unbalanced development.

2-2. The “New Development Concept” is diversified but too dispersed

A recent article in the *People's Daily*, an official CCP medium, introduced Xi's “New Development Concept” as a guiding ideology for action in all areas of economic and social development to assure the strategic

doctrine of “Five-in-One” and “The Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy”.⁴ The concept was proposed by Xi at the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee in October 2015, encompassing five orientations such as innovation, coordination, green, openness, and commonality, emphasizing that the “New Development Concept” is a profound change concerning China's future development:⁵ 1. innovation: to solve the problem of development dynamics; 2. coordination: to solve the problem of unbalanced development; 3. green: for better harmony between people and nature; 4. openness: to solve the problem of skewed internal and external developments; 5. commonality: to solve social justice problems. From the connotation of these five points, the “New Development Concept” seems very

3. “These Words of General Secretary Xi Jinping at the Central Economic Work Conference Rang True,” CCP Central Discipline Inspection Commission and State Supervision Commission website, January 11, 2021.

4. “Five-in-One”: comprehensively promoting economic, political, cultural, social, and civilized ecological construction; “Four Comprehensive Ideas”: the strategic layout of holistically building a modernized socialist country, deepening reform, ruling the country according to law and ruling the Party in a strict manner. Wang Xiaodong, Li Xiang and Wang Zhou, “A Profound Change in China's Every Development — Summary of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Remarks on the Complete, Accurate, and Full Implementation of the ‘New Development Concept’,” *People's Daily Online*, December 8, 2021. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1208/c64387-32302202.html>.

5. “Xi Jinping: Focusing Efforts to Implement the Spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session for a Generally Wealthy Society on Schedule,” *CCP News*, January 18, 2016. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2016/0118/c64094-28064766.html>.

diversified and covers almost all long-term issues of China's development since the reform and opening up.

However, the repeated emphasis on the CCP's unified leadership and coordination, rather than letting the market economy repair itself, reveals that its motive is mainly political for avoiding the impact of economic instability on the political level. Whether it is the issue of unbalanced regional development or social equity, it is in fact deeply related to China's social discontent and regime stability; and, as a result, we can see the CCP's approach is different from normal economic strategies that emphasize on innovation and economic circulations between internal and external markets. As it is now under the "New Development Concept" umbrella, the more emphasis is placed on coordination, the more difficult it is to focus on individual issues, resulting in a loss of focus due to excessive dispersion. For example, the energy crisis of September 2021, which resulted in a massive "power shutdown", is the result of an over-eagerness to achieve green development without considering the reality of economic production.

3. Trend Observation

Even though the "New Development Concept" has become Xi's guiding ideology for the future development of the CCP, there are still insurmountable objective realities in addition to internal and external constraints. The following section will discuss the issues in terms of the fundamental development imbalance and the economic outlook for 2022.

3-1. Long-standing development imbalances most difficult to overcome

At the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up, he adopted the strategy of "letting some people get rich first" and gave priority to the development of coastal areas and specific industries that could easily attract foreign investment and technology. The gradual shift from public to private ownership created a large number of "first to get rich" people and regions, as well as the phenomenon of "three disparities" (urban-rural, rich-poor, and east-west gaps). Therefore, the "New Development Concept" specifically focuses on coordination as the main solution to deal with this issue, while

the recent policy practice of the CCP is to solve the disparities mentioned above by means of “three distributions” and “common prosperity”. Although Xi pointed out at the 10th meeting of the CCP Central Financial Committee on August 17, 2021, that the goal of “common prosperity” is to highly improve the material and spiritual life of all people, and to promote common development in rural areas,⁶ he also wanted to solve the problems of unbalanced development and social justice. But in reality the CCP still needs to come up with a more specific and long-term solution. For example, private companies in China are currently encouraged to make voluntary donations to the government, but such moral persuasion must be accompanied by other administrative measures such as tax inspections, security checks, rectification, and more. If these measures, which fall in a grey area, evolve from short-term effects to long-term policies, they will cause private companies, especially foreign investors, to become suspicious of the

Chinese market and increase the hidden costs of investing. This will be even more detrimental to the “openness” concept in the “New Development Concept”, and will raise investors’ doubts about China’s sincerity in opening up and increase their hesitation in entering the Chinese market.

Moreover, the current “bureaucratic capitalism”, “the advancing state and the retreating private sectors” in China have shown that the CCP is the biggest controller of resources, holding the most vested interest and is the biggest beneficiary from the reform and opening up. But with the lion’s share of interests, how would the CCP and its members force the bureaucrats or large state-owned enterprises to “share the wealth” with the general Chinese people under the temptation of being in charge of everything? It can certainly not be accomplished just by anti-corruption or reform, since the established “winner take all” wealth distribution model is already irreversible. From these, we can see that the “get rich first to help others

6. “Xi Jinping Presided Over the Tenth Meeting of the Central Financial Committee and stressed the Importance of Promoting Common Prosperity in High-Quality Development, and Coordinating the Work of Preventing and Resolving Major Financial Risks,” *People’s Daily Online*, August 17, 2021.

later" idea promoted in the reform and opening-up era for 40 years was actually impractical. Therefore, the CCP will not be able to solve the longest-standing and most difficult problem of unbalanced development in the future with only nice ideas, slogans, and semi-compulsory short-term measures.

3-2. Stability is paramount to China' s 2022 economic outlook

Xi's Economic Work Conference of the CCP Central Committee in December 2021 set the overall requirement for economic work in 2022 as "stability first while pursuing progress", which means that the CCP authorities understand that although the economy has been gradually recovering since the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, it's only "better" than the same period last year — but not too much to expect; and it is difficult to say when the pandemic will be truly controllable as virus variants continue to emerge. On the other hand, this meeting also proposes the "houses are for living, not speculation" principle and encourages renting and buying homes to promote the construction of residential housing. The new policies represent a financial crisis for large real estate developers like Evergrande in 2021

and have exposed the fragility of China's real estate market and the possible domino effect, forcing the CCP to take careful steps in the face of such a financial crisis that could affect the domestic and even the world's capital markets. It should be noted that the gradual development of "reversing globalization" and the localization of production in Europe and the US during the pandemic crisis have led to the breakage, restructuring, and transfer of the manufacturing chain that was heavily dependent on China. This change will bring even more uncertainties to the Chinese economy.

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The Reality of Expanded China-Russia Military Cooperation

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In the face of the threat of US strategic bombers flying close to their respective borders, the Chinese and Russian defense ministers signed a “2021 to 2025 roadmap” on the development of expanded military cooperation between the two countries on November 23, 2021. This is expected to promote deeper cooperation between the two countries in joint patrols and military exercises.¹

Video call between Russian and Chinese defense ministers

The Russian defense ministry announced on the same day that China and Russia agreed to expand military cooperation over the next five years. During the video conference chaired by Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe and Russian Defense Minister Sergey

Shoygu, the two military chiefs approved the “2021-2025 Military Cooperation Roadmap” that focuses on strengthening bilateral cooperation in “strategic military exercises and joint patrols.”. The Chinese defense ministry said the roadmap will also cover strategic coordination in joint military activities to safeguard the interests of both countries and regional security. Wei also held a video call with Shoygu, according to the *Xinhua News Agency*.

Chinese H-6K bomber shows 8 pylons in strategic cruise

In a joint Chinese-Russian air force cruise taking place on November 19, 2021, the Chinese side sent two H-6K bombers, the first Chinese bomber with 8 external pylons, flying in formation with

1. “From Foreign Media: China and Russia to Further Expand Military Cooperation in the Next Five Years,” *Xinhua Net*, November 26, 2021. http://www.news.cn/mil/2021-11/26/c_1211462475.htm.

two Tu-95MC bombers from the Russian side. There are currently three variants in the frontline H-6 lineup: 1. the H-6N capable of providing/accepting aerial refueling and carrying ballistic missiles in its bomb bay, 2. the PLA Naval Air Force H-6J, and 3. the PLA Air Force H-6K. The H-6J mainly carries out anti-ship missions with the 400km-range YJ-12 missiles. Since the H-6J needs to enter the enemy's air defense range for desired attacking precision, the PLA has upgraded its avionics system and increased the number of pylons to eight in response to the challenge. The additional pylons can accommodate additional electronic warfare pods that interfere with enemy radar or guidance systems on incoming missiles through electronic interference or suppression. For instance, the inner pylons can be used to carry heavier missiles such as CJ-20 or YJ-12, while the outer pylons carry lighter missiles, electronic warfare pods, or optoelectronic pods for various electromagnetic interference, electromagnetic suppression, information support, anti-radiation as well as air-to-ground/sea missions.²

PLA sent only observers to “Zapad/Interaction-2021” exercise

In August 2021, the Russian Army sent troops to participate in the “Zapad/Interaction-2021” exercise held at the PLA Army's Qingtongxia Joint Tactical Training Base. The Chinese military saw the following features of the Sino-Russian joint military exercise: 1. The defense leaders of China and Russia, Wei Fenghe and Sergey Shoygu, respectively, observed the live exercise together, held talks, and signed cooperation documents; 2. The Russian army was invited to China for the first time to participate in a strategic exercise organized by the Chinese side, with Li Zuocheng, Chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, as the director of the exercise, to transform the PLA's high-level exercises from independent operations to open, collaborative actions; 3. The two armies have joined forces for better coordination by planning, training and working together as a team; 4. The actions of the two armies are planned based on common information and a proprietary strategic command system,

2. “Superpowers Unite/China-Russia Joint Cruise with 8-pylon Bombers,” *Takungpao.com*, November 29, 2021. <http://www.takungpao.com/news/232108/2021/1129/660082.html>.

which allows the two countries to fight together in a more substantial way; 5. The drills showed a new, innovative way of anti-terrorism warfare that consists of saturated firepower assaults, in-depth airborne/paratroop deployments, swarms of drones, and other tactics to lead the combat pattern from air-ground strikes to full-dimensional, holistic breakthrough operations.³

The Russian Western (Zapad)-2021 exercise saw troops from Belarus, Armenia, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Serbia, while the PLA, aiming to deepen Chinese-Russian military cooperation, sent only observers. As the PLA had regularly sent troops to participate in Russia's annual strategic exercises such as Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019, and Kavkaz-2020, but not in Zapad-2021, its decision is puzzling. According to Moscow's public statements, the Qingtongxia exercise was also changed from Sibu/Cooperation-2021 to

Zapad/Interaction-2021, indicating that their military partnership may not be as close as it appears. Since NATO is wary of Russian invasion into Ukraine, the PLA might have held back from sending troops to participate in the Zapad-2021 exercise to avoid provoking the NATO countries.⁴

Although Beijing and Moscow are expanding their military cooperation, such as joint cruises and military exercises, with the US as their common adversary, the show of power of the two sides is likely to score some points and noise on their political attitude but not have any real military significance.

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3. "Transcript of the August 2021 Ministry of National Defense Regular Press Conference, Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China," August 26, 2021. http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/jzhzt/2021-08/26/content_4893360.htm.
4. John R. Deni, "What's Russia Doing in Ukraine? Its Latest Military Drills Provide Critical Clues," *Atlantic Council*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/whats-russia-doing-in-ukraine-its-latest-military-drills-provide-critical-clues>.

The Reality of Expanded China-Russia Military Cooperation



CCP Drawing Harder Line On “Sinicization of Religion”

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The CCP convened the National Conference on Religious Work on December 3-4, 2021, with the theme of “how to sustain and strengthen the ‘Sinicization of religion’”¹. The term “Sinicization of religion” appeared in 2012 at a symposium of experts organized by Peking University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as a hardline policy of the CCP to strengthen its control over religions and to “maintain social stability”. At a time when the international community has shifted from criticism to sanctions over China’s human rights violations, the intensification of the “Sinicization of religion” shows that the CCP is maintaining even a harder line

stance on religions.

Evolution of “Sinicization of religion”

The CCP’s policy on religions in recent years can be roughly divided into three phases. The period from 2015 to 2019 was one of “praise the Party,” in which the government demanded religious groups support and serve the Party through “patriotic actions” such as raising of the national flag and singing the national anthem in temples and churches, in addition to praising Xi Jinping. The government also targeted Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions by demolishing their buildings, arresting

1. “Xi Jinping at the National Religious Work Conference Stressed the Importance of Insisting on the Direction of the ‘Sinicization of Religion’ in China and Actively Guiding Religions to Adapt to Socialist Society — Presided Over by Li Keqiang, Attended by Li Zhanshu, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, Han Zheng, and Addressed by Wang Yang,” *Xinhua Net*, December 4, 2021. http://www.news.cn/2021-12/04/c_1128131454.htm.

organized underground assemblies, curbing the operation of unregulated organizations through registration requirements while strengthening control over organizations that had obtained permits.

After 2020, the “dereligionization” period, was when the government’s crackdown extended to the daily festivities of the general population². As local governments introduced bonus mechanisms to encourage people to report illegal religious activities,³ any act with religious connotations in daily life could be punished for violating the “Sinicization of religion” policy and thus caused chaos. For example, in late November 2020, a dormitory manager at a Harbin university was reported for handing out candy on Thanksgiving Day. The university backed the report and thus responded that “the university does not advocate religious ‘foreign holidays’ and firmly prohibits religious activities on campus.”⁴

The National Conference on Religious Work in 2021 epitomes the next, and third, phase of the CCP’s attitude toward religions. In addition to the continued suppression of religious groups, the CCP plans to further tighten its control over religious organizations and society. The difference can be seen in the contents of the 2016 National Religious Work Conference. Compared to the 2021 conference, the 2016 work report suggested using mass organizations (e.g., trade unions and Communist Youth League) and the United Front (e.g., socialism, patriotism) to publicize the Party’s policies and influence the public through treatment of religious communities with “promoting mutual cooperation, convincing with reason, and offering compassion with emotion.” However, these words did not appear in the 2021 version, but instead rhetoric emerged such as “Party leadership” and “strict governance” that emphasize the

2. Wang Yun, “The Current State of Beliefs and Conflicts in the ‘Sinicization of Religion’ in China,” *Exchange Magazine*, Issue 177 (June 2021). <https://www.sef.org.tw/article-1-129-12915>.

3. Yeh Jia-Jia, “China is Suppressing Religions: CCP Offers High Monetary Awards to Those Who Report on Banned Religious Groups,” *Bitter Winter*, July 31, 2020.

4. “Thanksgiving: China’s HITU Dorm Manager Criticized by Students for Celebrating ‘Foreign Holidays’ by Handing Out Candy, the University Supports Reporting,” *BBC News Chinese*, November 27, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-55099127>.

Party and the rule of law. In terms of Internet governance, the 2016 conference only emphasized promoting the government’s religious policies through the Internet, while the 2021 version reiterated the strengthening of Internet administration.⁵ This change implies that the CCP’s response to religious groups since 2021 has shifted from a two-pronged “cooperation and suppression” approach a more high-pressure approach of “deepening control by the Party”.

Impact of “Sinicization of religion”

The change shows that the CCP still continues to tighten its grip on religious groups even in the face of growing international criticism. In fact, this hardline religious policy stems from the CCP’s logic of governance: the threat of “foreign powers” arising from the origins and connections between Western religions and foreign countries,

and the conflicts alleged to be caused by ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, which are critical to border security and regime stability, have led the CCP to resort to high-pressure tactics to curb the resistance of religious groups. Under such a development, Chinese people’s religious freedom will be even more limited. Although this may serve the CCP’s purpose of maintaining stability in the short term, forcibly restricting religious freedom in society may lead to more problems. First, can the religious elites, whether co-opted or appointed by the party, really lead followers to obey the party? The grassroots followers may not necessarily accept these elites, and the conflict between them may lead to more reactions and protests. Moreover, the functions originally provided by religious organizations, such as provision and social relief, may disappear as a result of changes in the religious system,⁶ which will inevitably raise the cost of

5. “Xi Jinping: Improve Works on Religions of All Levels Under the New Situation,” *Xinhua Net*, April 23, 2016. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm.

6. Under CCP administration, folk religions (e.g., Matzu) became a tool for the Party’s major foreign propaganda and united front effort, especially to Taiwan. For more details, see Gu Mingjun, “Matzu Culture as a Tool for CCP’s Influence Abroad,” *China Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (December 27, 2019), pp. 103-132.

governance for the Party. Amid the diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics by many foreign governments, the CCP’s extreme suppression of religions will, on the contrary, increase the risk of social instability and even more internal and external pressures.

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