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China's Use of Nontraditional Strategic Landpower in Asia

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that the People's Republic of China uses its police and internal security forces as a nontraditional means of projecting strategic Landpower in the Indo-Pacific and Central Asia. Instead of limiting analysis of China's power projection to military forces, this article employs new data on Chinese police engagements abroad to fill a gap in our understanding of the operating environment in Asia. Policymakers will gain an understanding of how these activities enhance China's presence, partnerships, and influence across the region to inform the development of recommendations for a more effective response.

Keywords: China, strategic Landpower, internal security, security force assistance, police

The People's Republic of China (PRC) uses nontraditional forms of strategic Landpower, particularly police and internal security forces, to shape Asia's strategic environment in Beijing's favor. While focus has mostly been on the rapidly growing capabilities and activities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), two internal security agencies—the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the People's Armed Police (PAP)—also conduct significant activities abroad, especially in the areas that make up China's regional periphery. The Ministry of Public Security, China's national police force, is responsible for public and political security.¹ The People's Armed Police is primarily an internal security paramilitary force; unlike MPS, it falls under the sole authority of the Central Military Commission.²

The US Army, Marine Corps, and Special Operations Command have defined strategic Landpower as “the application of landpower towards achieving overarching national or multinational (alliance or coalition) security objectives and guidance for a given military campaign or operation.”³ I describe China's use of internal security forces abroad as a form of “nontraditional strategic Landpower,” for two reasons. First, the forces employed are not traditional Landpower *forces* (armies) but internal security forces acting abroad. Second, these forces engage in activities that address nontraditional security *threats*, which play a prominent role in China's comprehensive national security concept and are also salient to many countries along China's regional

periphery. In these ways, China is applying ground forces to achieve its national security objectives and guidance.

While these activities aim to secure their objectives through peacetime operations and outreach below the level of armed conflict, they influence the scope and vitality of US partnerships and shape the regional theater in ways that could matter in a future conflict. The Department of Defense states that “the Joint Force must be ready to counter or defeat the efforts of hostile actors seeking to undermine our interests without triggering a joint conflict . . . [in] competition below the threshold of armed conflict.”⁴ US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) states that it “is committed to enhancing stability in the Asia-Pacific region by promoting security cooperation, encouraging peaceful development, responding to contingencies, deterring aggression, and, when necessary, fighting to win. This approach is based on partnership, presence, and military readiness.”⁵ As it pursues these objectives, the US Army, in particular, “cannot ignore the ‘Phase 0’ or competition below the threshold of war domain,” as “Army advantages in military-to-military relations with [INDOPACOM] allies and partners position the service well to counter this Chinese peacetime shaping during the competition phase.”⁶

The international activities of China’s internal security forces should be included in assessments of China’s regional and global security presence to obtain a complete picture of the American military’s operating environment in Asia. These activities augment traditional military power by improving PRC intelligence and domain awareness and offering opportunities for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shape the information environment and engage in narrative competition. They provide concrete security benefits to countries in the region but also disseminate Chinese ideas about using internal security forces for political and regime security and could open new avenues for potential PRC coercion. In general, overseas activity by internal security forces allows China to enhance its security presence, partnerships, and influence throughout Asia.

As a result, these activities require attention from the Department of Defense and interagency leaders. To compete effectively, the United States must not only “see, sense, and understand” regional threats, but also comprehend where and how PRC security forces operate, including these forces’ engagement in traditional and nontraditional security cooperation programs.⁷ An assessment of where and how China uses nontraditional forms of strategic Landpower to shape the operating environment in Asia

can inform future thinking on American Landpower projection and security force assistance in the Indo-Pacific.⁸

PRC Concepts of “National Security” and Activity by Internal Security Agencies Abroad

In assessments of China’s regional security presence, much of the US defense establishment’s focus has been on PLA military diplomacy and security cooperation. The Department of Defense’s 2023 *Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* noted that “CCP leaders view the PLA’s growing global presence as an essential part of the PRC’s international activities to create an international environment conducive to China’s national rejuvenation.”⁹ The PLA engages in international military cooperation and military diplomacy in Asia to shape the strategic environment through port calls, exercises, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the sale or donation of equipment, among other methods.

The concept of national security developed and implemented by the Chinese party-state under Xi Jinping (called the “comprehensive national security concept,” or 总体国家安全观, *zongti guojia anquanguan*) defines “national security” broadly and in ways that are different from the American conception of the term, which focuses primarily on the deployment of hard military power to defend against external threats.¹⁰ Today, China’s comprehensive national security concept encompasses 21 different types of “security,” almost double the number when the concept was first promulgated in 2014.¹¹ The foundation of “national” security in China, however, is “political security”: protection of the “party leadership, China’s socialist system, and the authority of the CCP Central Committee with Xi Jinping as the core.” The concept closely links internal and external security and includes an enhanced focus on “nontraditional” security threats with a significant domestic component, such as terrorism, piracy, and social or political instability. Consequently, domestic and internal security agencies have a comparatively large role in forming and implementing China’s “national” security policy, which is fundamentally oriented around protecting party rule.

This framework for perceiving and defining national security threats allows nominally internal security agencies to assume a global presence. In 2017, Xi directed officials in China’s political-legal system (the internal security apparatus) to adopt a “global vision” in national and state security work.¹² Since then, China’s use of police and law enforcement agencies

to engage in security activities abroad has steadily increased; these activities include bilateral police diplomacy, formal security cooperation agreements, police training programs, multilateral engagement, global rendition campaigns, and “transnational repression” of individuals overseas.¹³ According to public statements by senior PRC officials, law enforcement activities abroad explicitly seek to prevent and resolve overseas security risks, revise global security governance, “build a new system for international cooperation in public security,” and “effectively enhance [China’s] security influence.”¹⁴ Internal security agencies, therefore, play a nontrivial role in China’s foreign security policy.

Recently, such activities have been described under the auspices of Xi’s Global Security Initiative (GSI). While GSI remains fairly vague, it describes global law enforcement cooperation as a means to build security architecture to address nontraditional threats and revise international security governance.¹⁵ Chinese rhetoric portrays the US alliance/partner system as zero-sum, destabilizing, and inadequate for many contemporary security challenges; the PRC offers nontraditional security cooperation through GSI as an alternative framework for security governance that better meets the needs of many countries, especially those in the developing world and Global South whose significant security challenges do not take the form of conventional military threats and who may not currently be included in the existing network of US alliances and partnerships.¹⁶ China’s internal security agencies are key actors in constructing this new global security architecture.

Mapping China’s Nontraditional Security Outreach

In pursuing national objectives, China’s internal security leaders not only act as domestic law enforcement officials, but also engage regularly with foreign counterparts.¹⁷ Figure 1 shows the foreign-diplomatic outreach of China’s top two domestic security officials from October 2022 to October 2023: Wang Xiaohong, the minister of public security, and Chen Wenqing, head of the Central Political-Legal Commission, which oversees China’s internal security system.

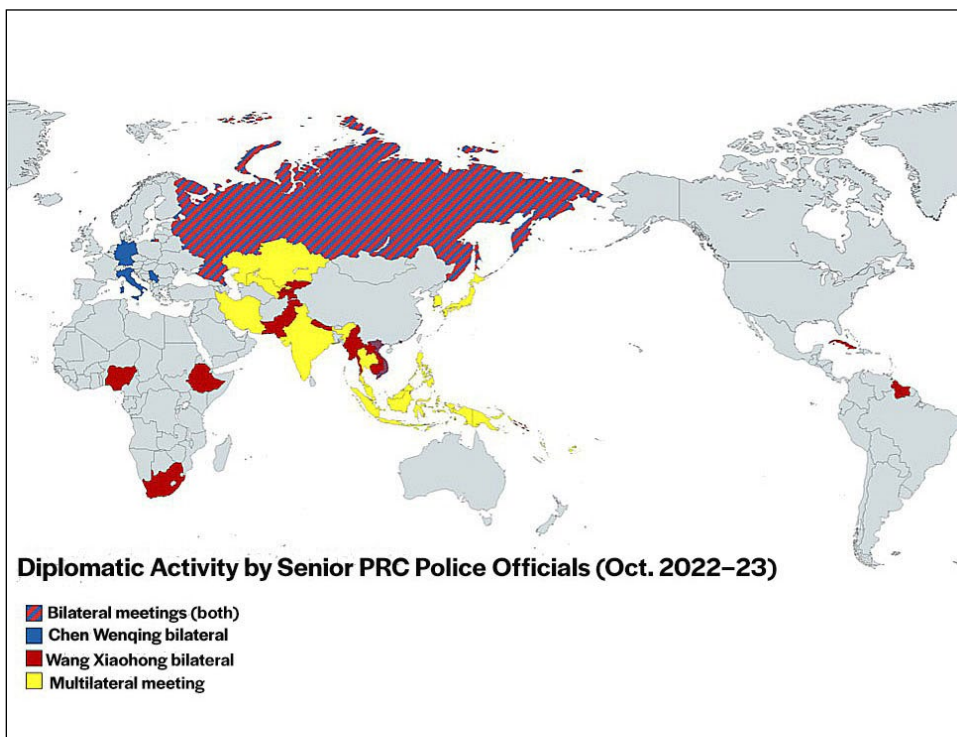


Figure 1. Diplomatic activity by senior PRC police officials (October 2022 to October 2023)
(Source: Data for map compiled by author)

As figure 1 illustrates, much of China's police diplomacy and law enforcement security cooperation is concentrated along the PRC's regional periphery—either in Central Asia or Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. A 2022 study by the Center for American Progress similarly found that Asia was the largest recipient of the Ministry of Public Security's bilateral diplomatic outreach, materiel assistance, and police training.¹⁸ Thus, although China's police and law enforcement activities abroad are globally relevant, they are especially important for those seeking to understand the evolving security environment in Asia.

Figure 1 also highlights the utility of Asia's regional organizations and fora, which allow China to augment its participation in and influence on nontraditional security cooperation mechanisms in the region. Over the course of roughly a year following the 20th Party Congress (fall 2022–fall 2023), Chinese domestic security leaders engaged with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN+3, the countries party to the Mekong Memorandum of Understanding on Drug Control, and a new ministerial-level forum, cohosted by Beijing, with Pacific Island countries; China also conducts regular joint security patrols along the Mekong River.¹⁹ Each forum offers China's security

officials additional touchpoints with regional counterparts and creates opportunities for China's domestic security agencies to advance their outreach and cooperation.

China also now hosts the Global Public Security Cooperation Forum (GPSCF, formerly the Lianyungang Forum), an MPS-backed effort to expand security cooperation among law enforcement agencies worldwide and to promote the export of China's security and surveillance technologies.²⁰ Hosting GPSCF also facilitates additional bilateral conversations on the Forum's sidelines. During the 2023 GPSCF, for example, Minister Wang met with counterparts from Guyana, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa, Suriname, and Tajikistan.²¹

Chinese security assistance and cooperation activities often address perceived security challenges along China's regional periphery—either because Chinese officials share some degree of threat perception with their interlocutors or because Beijing's assistance can help address a security problem their interlocutors believe demands attention. Some MPS outreach advances cooperation on nontraditional security and law enforcement challenges such as drug smuggling and transnational crime; other events explicitly promote the CCP's regime-centric vision of national security and “political security.” At a 2021 “Peaceful China” summit held in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, the MPS promoted Chinese policing techniques and tools as a model for combining economic growth with long-term social stability.²² At a BRICS meeting in July 2023, Wang Yi, Beijing's top foreign policy official, argued that “countries in the Global South share an interest in resisting external infiltration and maintaining political and regime security” and should cooperate to do so.²³ China's domestic security organs do not neatly delineate ordinary criminal policing and law enforcement work from political policing in their internal operations, and MPS activities abroad blend traditional forms of law enforcement partnership with cooperation centered on protecting political and regime security.²⁴

Due to these actors' outreach, many countries in Asia are engaged in conversations about security cooperation and assistance with Beijing—and they are doing so not just through military channels, but also through law enforcement outreach and cooperation. Depending on the arrangement, China's interlocutors might be a country's interior ministry, law enforcement agency, or military (including land forces). Some activities could provide Chinese security forces direct access to the country in question, but the circumstances and terms of that access are often not clear from publicly available information. For example, one of China's two reported

facilities in eastern Tajikistan, ostensibly a “joint counterterrorism center,” is said to be staffed by the People’s Armed Police, while the other is described as falling under MPS—but it is unclear whether the lines of reporting and command run through the Ministry of Public Security (which absorbed the PAP’s Border Defense Forces in 2018) and State Council, or the Central Military Commission (under which the PAP now falls).²⁵ A leaked draft of the PRC’s 2022 agreement with the Solomon Islands—implemented on the Chinese side by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, and Ministry of Public Security—raised concerns that it might allow the deployment of Chinese “police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces” to the Solomon Islands in the event of domestic unrest.²⁶

China is also training security officials throughout Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific, building its own set of security partnerships and augmenting its regional presence. In 2017, at the Interpol summit in Beijing, Xi offered to share China’s experience in security governance with the world and said that MPS would establish an academy to train more than 20,000 law enforcement personnel from developing countries.²⁷ An article the following year highlighting China’s contributions to international police cooperation reported that the MPS had trained more than 20,000 police officers from 116 countries.²⁸ At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Uzbekistan in 2022, Xi offered to train 2,000 law enforcement personnel and assist with counterterrorism cooperation.²⁹ China’s February 2023 white paper on the Global Security Initiative called for “the establishment of a global training system to train for developing countries more law enforcement personnel who are responsive to their countries’ security needs” and offered to provide “5,000 training opportunities” for security professionals from the developing world in the next five years.³⁰

Efforts to portray China as a global and regional security provider are not new. Most of China’s emphasis previously has been on its support for United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations. Official sources note that China’s armed forces have contributed more than 40,000 personnel to UN peacekeeping operations, that the PRC’s troop contributions exceed those of the other P-5 countries combined, that China is the second-largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget, and that it provides training for UN peacekeeping forces.³¹ Less well-known is that China’s police, not just its armed forces, have been consistent participants in peacekeeping operations,

starting with East Timor in 2000.³² As of 2021, China had sent more than 2,600 “peacekeeping police” to 11 UN peacekeeping missions.³³

The Ministry of Public Security also runs a training center for peacekeeping police at China People’s Police University in Langfang (which hosts the ministry’s International Law Enforcement Cooperation School). Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, visited the China Peacekeeping Police Training Center (CPPTC) in 2018, and CPPTC hosted a conference in July 2023 on peacekeeping police with the UN, International Committee of the Red Cross, and law enforcement officials from 14 countries.³⁴ As of 2020, China had provided training to 1,500 peacekeepers from 60 countries, and the MPS had trained more than 1,000 foreign peacekeeping police.³⁵ The Ministry of Public Security, therefore, plays a substantial role in this facet of China’s global security presence and its engagement with the UN.

Implications of PRC Internal Security Agency Outreach in the Indo-Pacific

China’s nontraditional security cooperation in Central Asia and the Indo-Pacific shapes the regional operating environment and allows the PRC to enhance its presence, partnerships, and influence. These activities augment traditional Landpower by improving PRC domain awareness, offering opportunities to shape the information environment, providing concrete security benefits to current and potential American partners, disseminating Chinese ideas about political control, and opening potential new avenues for future PRC coercion.

First, Chinese police presence and partnerships in countries across the region may enhance PRC domain awareness and facilitate preparatory intelligence activities throughout the regional theater, including with respect to local infrastructure, leadership, and security threats. Chinese officials’ ongoing discussions with the government of Papua New Guinea about potential internal security assistance, for example, may help the PRC understand how Papua New Guinea views the principal challenges to its domestic security, how existing Australian and American defense and security assistance agreements do or do not address those threats, which types of security assistance could best fill the currently unmet needs of the PNG government, and what the government’s concerns about and conditions for accepting such assistance from the PRC might be.³⁶ These activities and engagements also provide a mechanism by which PRC officials can distribute

messaging to foreign counterparts in government, media, and civil society, thereby shaping the information space and potentially facilitating future information operations. Washington's ability to recognize where and how China's use of nontraditional security cooperation could accrue informational advantages and shape the information space is important for US Army and interagency efforts in the region.

Second, by providing security benefits to regional countries and addressing security challenges in the region, China enhances its security influence and makes itself a viable—sometimes even attractive—partner to those countries. Where these activities and assistance address security threats and challenges that would otherwise go unaddressed, China's role as a security provider to countries and organizations on its periphery fills needs that would either remain unresolved or require additional US and allied/partner investments to resolve. China's focus on nontraditional security, moreover, means that it may be providing different and complementary security benefits within the region, which may be viewed positively by governments and leaders in Asia.³⁷ American messaging about China's nonmilitary security outreach in Asia, and Army efforts to succeed in narrative competition, must recognize and reflect this reality.³⁸

Third, international activity by MPS and other internal security actors opens new avenues for potential political influence and coercion to achieve political ends. Paul Nantulya notes that MPS, which provides police training in Africa on a scale that matches or exceeds the military sphere, organizes its training around core principles of party control over security forces.³⁹ China's nontraditional security outreach may therefore disseminate useful tactical and operational knowledge but simultaneously contribute to the dissemination of norms of authoritarian political control. Even if the CCP's approach is not directly copied by recipient countries, repeated exposure could normalize its approach among a significant number of the world's domestic security forces, with troubling implications for repression, civil liberties, and human rights.

Such influence could also open new avenues for future coercion. If China is willing to leverage its growing role as a security provider, the threat or future removal of specific benefits it currently provides could heighten or reintroduce security risks in those countries receiving training and assistance from PRC security forces. How regional countries view their "security partner(s) of choice" and their vulnerability to coercion bear directly on two of the metrics discussed by the Army as markers of success in competition.⁴⁰ Thus, to the extent that China's activities reduce America's role as a security partner of choice across the region, and render regional actors more vulnerable

to security (not just economic) coercion by the PRC, American success in multidomain competition will require increased attention to those activities and an interagency strategy for responding to them.

Conclusion

The People's Republic of China employs nontraditional forms of strategic Landpower—particularly its police and internal security forces—to shape the strategic environment in Asia, thereby enhancing China's presence, partnerships, and influence in the region. The US government, the Department of Defense, the US Army, and INDOPACOM should add these activities to assessments of PRC regional and global security presence to gain a more comprehensive picture of the US military's operating environment and sharpen their ability to "see, sense, and understand" the region's evolving security landscape.⁴¹ Acknowledging the full range of Chinese security initiatives and activities will provide a more complete, nuanced picture of threats facing the region, the views of current/potential allies and partners, and the networks of partnership and presence the PRC is creating. This holistic view is critical for the United States to "seize the initiative" and respond to a broad range of regional security challenges effectively.

These revised assessments should prompt a reevaluation of American security force assistance programs in Asia, whether conducted by the United States military or by allies and partners. For example, the Army's Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs), play a key role in a region where many militaries remain land-centric.⁴² Most central is the 5th SFAB, aligned to INDOPACOM, which currently distributes its work across 12 countries.⁴³ The 54th SFAB has also deployed advisers to Indonesia, and the 3rd SFAB, regionally aligned to US Central Command (CENTCOM), has partnered with some Central Asian countries.⁴⁴ Security force assistance programs can reassure allies and partners through forward presence at a lower cost while creating fewer targets (compared to bases or large deployments); form advisory relationships that generate enhanced cooperation in land, cyber, information, and space domains; reduce the scope for coercion of partner countries by offering "access to US resources, military technology and materiel and the possibility of greater financial, information, and economic cooperation"; and broadly help prepare the operational environment for a wide range of possible contingencies.⁴⁵

China's employment of nontraditional forms of strategic Landpower to build its presence, partnerships, and security influence raises the question of whether—and where—the United States should revise its security force

assistance programs to compete effectively with China and where it might work with allies and partners to do so. American military leaders operating in the region must be aware of when and how their counterparts benefit from security assistance offered by Beijing and coordinate closely with their civilian counterparts to decide when and how countering or competing directly with that security assistance is appropriate and strategically advantageous. In some places, Beijing may offer forms of security assistance the United States cannot or should not try to match—for example, assisting police or paramilitary forces that repress domestic opposition to keep a particular regime or leader in power. In other cases, the United States may be able to address legitimate security challenges and provide security benefits that match or exceed those offered by Beijing, and doing so may provide new or enhanced opportunities to shape the regional environment in Asia in America's favor.

To capitalize on these opportunities, the United States may need to consider sending security force assistance personnel to a broader pool of countries in Asia, beyond those with whom the United States already has deep and enduring security relationships. In an ideal world, the Army should consider aligning a second SFAB with INDOPACOM and revisit how the 3rd SFAB is employed to account for evolving Chinese security activities in CENTCOM's area of responsibility, especially Central Asia. Since these changes may be infeasible in the near term, the interagency should also be engaged to provide full-spectrum support for redesigned and enhanced security assistance efforts in the region. In addition to Army SFABs, the National Guard's State Partnership Program, the FBI, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Justice, the State Department's International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) Program, and others can be leveraged to integrate nontraditional security, law enforcement, and rule of law training into cooperation and assistance programs with a broad range of countries, tailored appropriately to the circumstances and US objectives in each.⁴⁶

The United States should also work with allies and partners who can bring their capabilities and expertise in nontraditional security assistance to augment capacity. Japan, for example, has experience with human security-focused assistance and is increasingly a trusted security and defense partner for much of Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ Existing European police training programs could also be leveraged to address critical security needs in Asia.⁴⁸ In light of China's use of nontraditional forms of strategic Landpower in Asia, reviewing, redistributing, and enhancing American and allied/partner security force assistance capacity across the region could address many of the region's critical security challenges and enable the United States to maintain and strengthen

the presence and partnerships that support American strategic Landpower in the Indo-Pacific.

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