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China Global Security Tracker

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HIGHLIGHTS

- PLA steps up activities in the East and South China Sea
- China keeps up pressure on Taiwan with military maneuvers
- Defense budget up 6.6 percent in 2020
- China marks 30 years of participation in UN peacekeeping operations
- China to join Arms Trade Treaty



MERICS

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FOCUS TOPIC: THE PLA'S COVID-19 DIPLOMACY - A PEEK BEHIND THE MASK

Much has been written about China's "mask diplomacy" during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the epicenter of the pandemic shifted from China to the rest of the world, China's government sent planeloads of masks and medical supplies to hard-hit countries around the world. Beijing's "mask diplomacy" sought to bolster China's image as a responsible global power and was widely perceived as part of Beijing's attempt to control the narrative around the pandemic and distract from its initial cover-up. But while all the attention focused on the Chinese government's actions, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was carrying out its own, much quieter version of mask diplomacy.

According to MERICS data, in the three months between March 13 and June 19, the PLA sent military planes full of medical material to 46 countries. The material, which mostly consisted of masks and personal protective equipment (PPE), was invariably donated to the recipient countries' armed forces or defense ministries. The PLA also set up video conferences with foreign militaries to share its experiences of fighting the Covid-19 outbreak and strengthen military-to-military relations.

At first glance, the Chinese government's mask diplomacy campaign and the PLA's look remarkably similar. However, a number of differences suggest there were different goals and strategies at play.

The PLA's approach was more strategic

First, they targeted different groups of countries. Government "mask diplomacy" targeted many developed countries such as Japan, Germany, Italy or Spain, as did China's private sector's sales and donations. The PLA's outreach, on the other hand, was directed towards developing countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, as well as some in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The majority of these are strategically important for China's – and the PLA's – global ambitions. The list includes a large number of countries along the Belt and Road Initiative – President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project –, together with states whose governments are sympathetic to Beijing, or may be persuaded to become so. The second group is particularly important for China's leadership when it comes to sensitive votes in multilateral forums or international organizations, such as the European Union or the United Nations.

A second difference was the level of publicity the two campaigns received. Publicity was the hallmark of the Chinese government's mask diplomacy in Europe and elsewhere; it was strongly promoted in the media and Chinese officials took to social media channels like Twitter to trumpet the aid deliveries. They used the donations to promote China as a model for handling the epidemic, in a bid to project soft power and shape the narrative. They portrayed China as a country that had successfully controlled its own outbreak and was behaving as a responsible power by helping other nations. Meanwhile, the PLA's efforts were much quieter. Announcements were often limited to short pieces, largely devoid of detail, in the armed forces' newspaper – the PLA Daily – and so have gone largely unnoticed.

These differences in approach suggest a different goal behind the Chinese military's mask diplomacy campaign. Beijing's donations were meant to change the Covid-19 narrative by garnering positive international media attention and praise for China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, thus bolstering Beijing's self-styled image as a responsible global power, whereas the PLA's diplomatic efforts seem more tightly focused and strategic.

The aim was to use medical donations as defense diplomacy tools

Although the quantity of PLA-donated masks or PPE was rarely stated, we can see from the instances when quantities were published that this was clearly not a numbers game. The number of face masks delivered to various European countries through government-to-government donations was in the hundreds of thousands, or even the millions. The PLA's donations seem to have been much smaller. In one of the only cases for which numbers were published, the PLA's donation to Zimbabwe's military consisted of only 62,000 masks and 19,000 pieces of PPE.

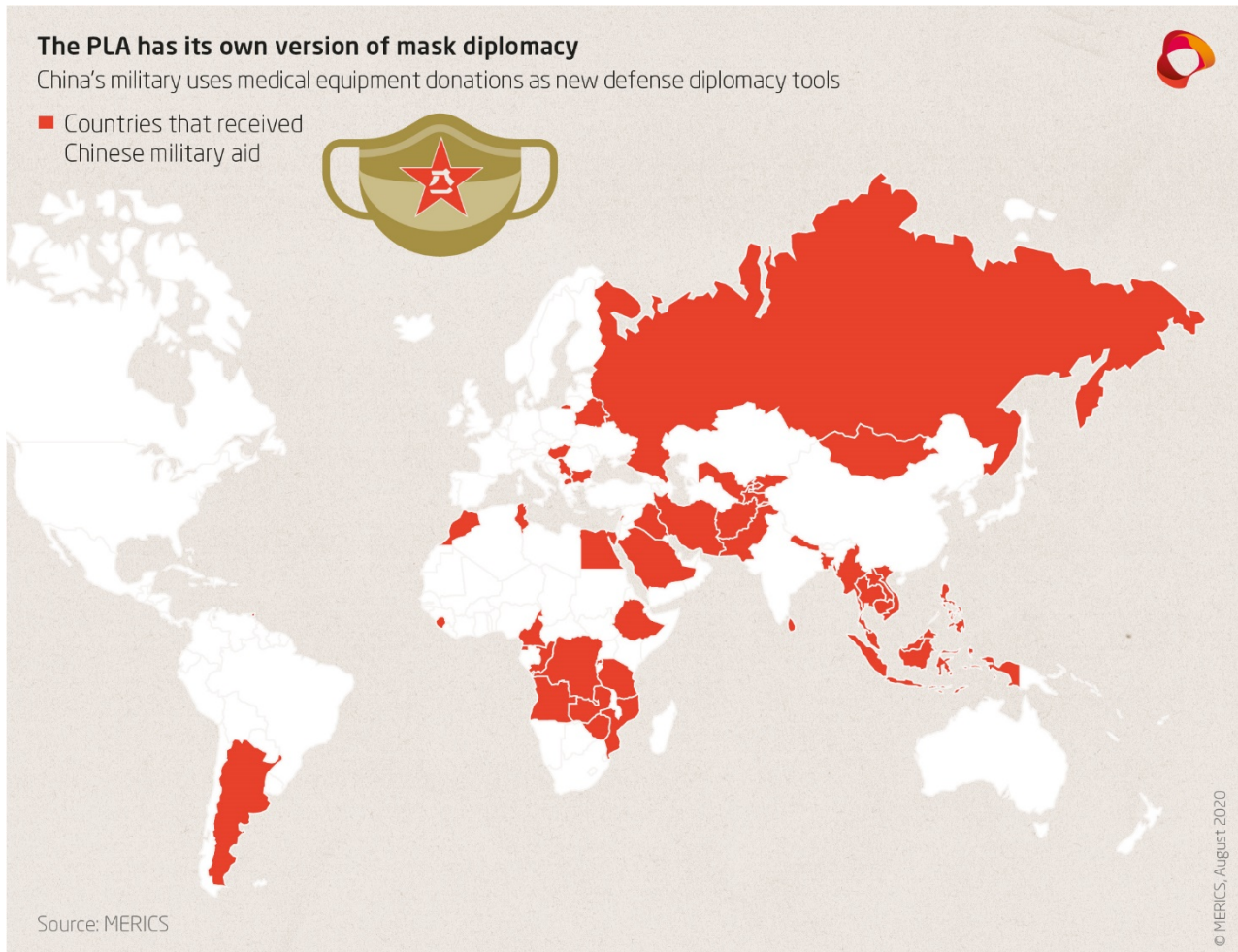
The PLA's donations seem to have been mostly symbolic. The aim was not to solve shortages of medical material in hard-hit countries, but rather to use donations as defense diplomacy tools. Given the lack of publicity surrounding these efforts, it also seems clear that the goal was not to restore or improve China's image with the general public and civil society in recipient countries. Instead, it was about generating goodwill and securing buy-in among political elites and, especially, their armed forces. The military are powerful political actors in many of the states that received PLA donations.

Beijing hopes to strengthen military-to-military ties

By providing much-needed donations of medical material to foreign militaries, Beijing hopes to strengthen military-to-military ties and to portray itself as an essential and reliable partner in times of crisis, unlike the United States or Europe. While government-to-government Covid-19 aid presented China as a benevolent superpower, the PLA's donations were aimed at building relationships with defense elites able to support China's hoped-for global expansion.

This effort has particularly important implications in Southeast Asia, given China's more aggressive behavior in the Asia-Pacific region in recent months. The PLA has been accused of taking advantage of other countries' distraction with Covid-19 to engage in increasingly provocative behavior that has included regular military maneuvers and flyovers around Taiwan, and deployments in the disputed areas of the East and South China Seas. The Chinese military has been busy pursuing Beijing's geopolitical goals while other countries' armed forces announced they would halt their activities in order to focus on fighting the pandemic.

China’s stated ambition is to become a global power with a strong military that can fight and win wars by 2049. Against the background of worsening relations with the US, Beijing has clearly decided to invest in defense diplomacy, and the Covid-19 pandemic has provided China’s military with a perfect opportunity. The PLA’s donations are likely to have gone down much better in recipient countries than the government’s mask diplomacy which was often accompanied by moralizing undertones. Although small, the donations will have set the stage for closer ties with Beijing.



DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

Foreign and security policy

- **Defense budget up 6.6 percent in 2020.** The National People’s Congress (NPC), held in May rather than March this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, approved a 1.27 trillion CNY defense budget – a 6.6 percent increase year-on-year. China has had 25 years of continuous defense budget increases, although the pace of growth is slowing. The fact that defense spending is still growing while other government expenditures are being cut as a result of the Covid-19 induced economic slowdown and the trade war with the US is evidence of the importance Beijing puts on the military as a vehicle for its ambitions to become a global power by 2049. By contrast, foreign affairs spending will drop by 11.8 percent this year. The military budget increase also demonstrates Beijing’s sense of insecurity in the current geopolitical environment. The Ministry of Defense justified the increase in defense spending by citing security threats from “separatism” in Taiwan and the unilateral actions by “some countries”, an indirect reference to the US.
- **Mixed messages emerge from the NPC.** Against the background of the coronavirus pandemic and increasing tensions with the US, China’s government used the NPC to try to present itself as a responsible power, reiterating its ambition to contribute to a “human community with a shared future” and to the “reform” of the global governance system. However, statements from party and military leaders at side meetings were more aggressive: they included direct criticism of alleged US attempts to “contain” China, and an open discussion about the need to launch an attack on Taiwan if peaceful reunification fails.
- **Beijing names geographical features, sets up administrative districts in the South China Sea.** In April, China’s government announced it had named 80 geographical features in the disputed South China Sea, something not done since 1983. The move came only one day after Beijing set up two administrative districts to govern the Paracel and Spratly Islands as part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) territory. Both actions were attempts by China to create facts on the ground and reassert its sovereignty over the disputed region when other countries with claims on the sea and islands were grappling with the coronavirus pandemic.

Force development and capabilities

- **Amendment of PAP Law approved.** A revision to the Law on the People’s Armed Police Force (PAP) was approved at a meeting of the NPC’s Standing Committee on June 20 and came into force the following day. The revision gives more resources to the PAP, which also controls China’s Coast Guard. It also clarifies and expands the PAP’s responsibilities from its more traditional domestic duties (such as anti-terrorism, disaster relief and rescue operations) to embrace also maritime law enforcement and operations.
- **PLA reserve troops placed under the direct control of the CMC.** From July 1, China’s reserve military forces came under the direct control of the CCP’s Central Committee and the Central Military Commission. Previously, reserve troops were under the

supervision of military organs and local CCP committees. The move ensures direct control of the entire armed forces by the party center and President Xi Jinping and should be seen alongside the decision to place the PAP and the Coast Guard under CMC control in 2018.

- **Retired head of China’s aircraft carrier program under investigation.** The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) announced on May 12 that Hu Wenming, the former chairman and Party secretary of the China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC) was under investigation for “serious violations of discipline and law”, a euphemism for corruption. Hu oversaw the development of China’s two aircraft carriers, the Liaoning and the Shandong. Official media has reported that the CCDI investigated CSIC at least twice between 2015 and 2019, during Hu’s tenure. Each time they found persistent problems pointing to endemic corruption at the company. Hu is just the latest CSIC employee to be arrested. The first to fall was CSIC’s anti-corruption czar, Liu Changhong, who was arrested in September 2017. General manager Sun Bo, a deputy of Hu Wenming, was arrested in 2018, along with the director and deputy director of two CSIC research institutes. Although CSIC was merged with the China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) in November 2019, the arrest of Hu suggests there is an ongoing anti-corruption investigation into the company.
- **PPLA unveils new equipment and capabilities:**
 - The PLA Navy (PLAN) commissioned the Nanchang, China’s first Type 055 guided-missile destroyer in January, following its launch in 2017. The PLAN celebrated its 71st anniversary by launching its second Type 075 amphibious helicopter assault ship on April 26, seven months after the first one. The Type 075 ships lie at the heart of the PLA’s upgraded landing capabilities – a vital component of any potential attack on Taiwan – and of its new amphibious force for overseas missions. Two new Type 094 Jin-class nuclear powered ballistic missile submarines also went into service in April. Meanwhile, China’s aircraft carrier program has continued its rapid progress. On May 25, the Shandong, China’s first domestically made aircraft carrier started its first sea trials after being commissioned in December.
 - The PLA Army reported that a new vehicle-mounted howitzer, the PCL-181 had entered service with the Eastern Theater Command following its public debut at the National Day parade on October 1, 2019.
 - The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) conducted test flights for the domestically developed AG600 amphibious aircraft, the largest in the world. And China’s first domestically made airdrop-capable four-wheeled armored vehicles, developed by China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), also entered into service with the PLAAF in May.

- **China's successes and setbacks in the arms trade:**
 - **China delivers battle tanks to Nigeria.** On April 8, the Nigerian Army received the first batch of VT-4 main battle tanks purchased from state-owned NORINCO in 2019. Nigerian military personnel who will operate the tanks received training in China.
 - **China's defense industry exports advanced platforms to undisclosed buyers.** NORINCO announced in late March that, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, it had delivered a batch of advanced portable HJ-12E anti-tank missiles to an undisclosed foreign buyer, marking the first time that this type of weapon has been exported. NORINCO also delivered two customized VT-4 main battle tanks to another undisclosed foreign buyer in April.
 - **Thailand suspends order for Chinese submarines.** The Thai Navy announced in April that it had put an order for two Chinese-made S-26T submarines on hold, as its military budget was cut by one third in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic. Spending for the submarines, which were ordered in 2017, is likely to be deferred to 2021.

SECURITY DIPLOMACY

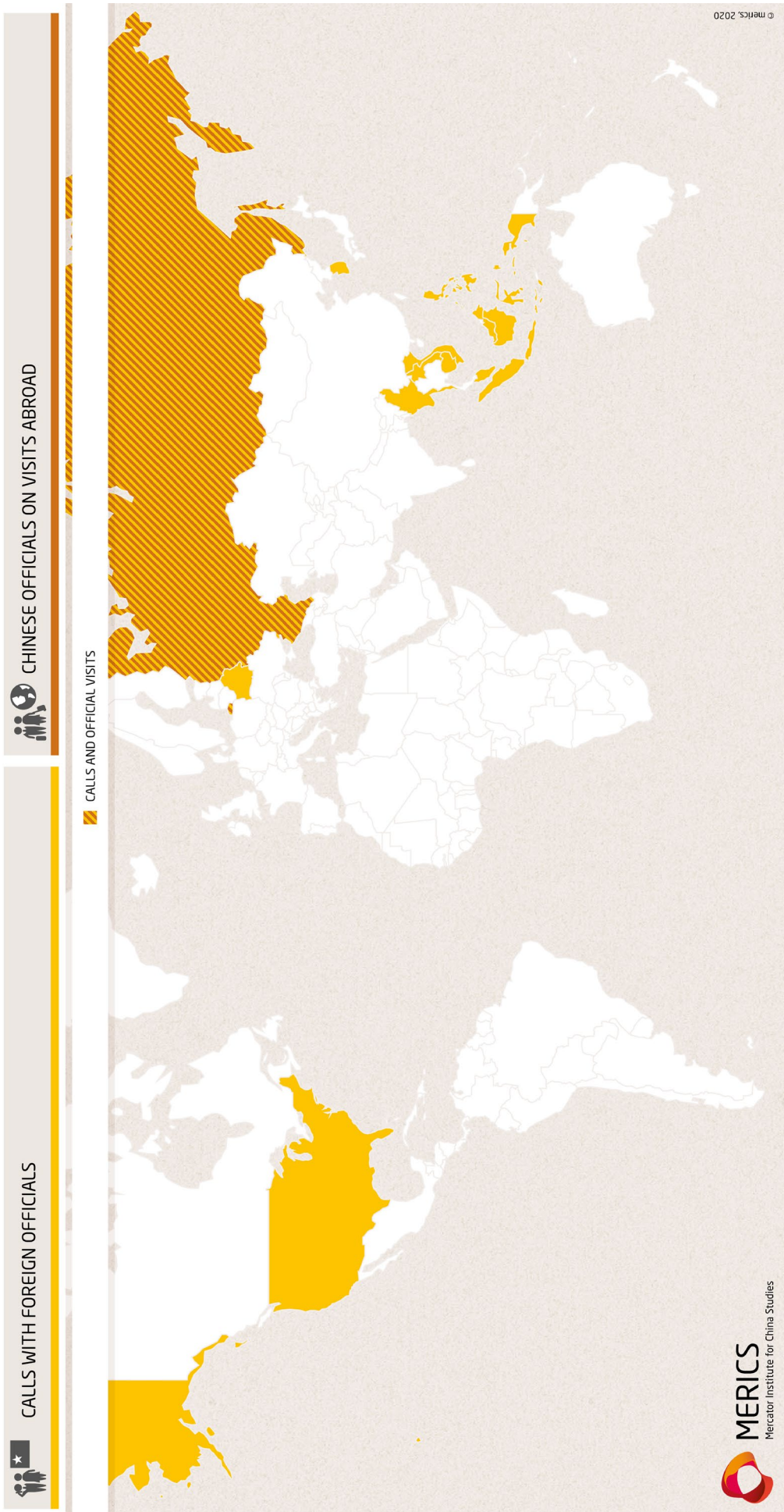
Defense diplomacy

High-level meetings

- **Defense Minister Wei Fenghe replaces in-person meetings with phone calls.** With international travel disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the period between January and June saw only one in-person meeting between CMC members and foreign defense officials. Defense Minister Wei Fenghe visited Russia at the end of June for the Victory Day parade. While there, he met with his Russian counterpart. All Wei's other exchanges between March and June were conducted over the phone. He called the defense ministers of 12 different countries during that period to emphasize the PLA's role in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and to strengthen bilateral relations.
- **High-level forums and exchanges postponed due to Covid-19.** From the Shangri-La Dialogue to a new round of negotiations on a South China Sea code of conduct, most international events in the security and defense sphere were cancelled or postponed as countries focused instead on controlling the coronavirus outbreak.

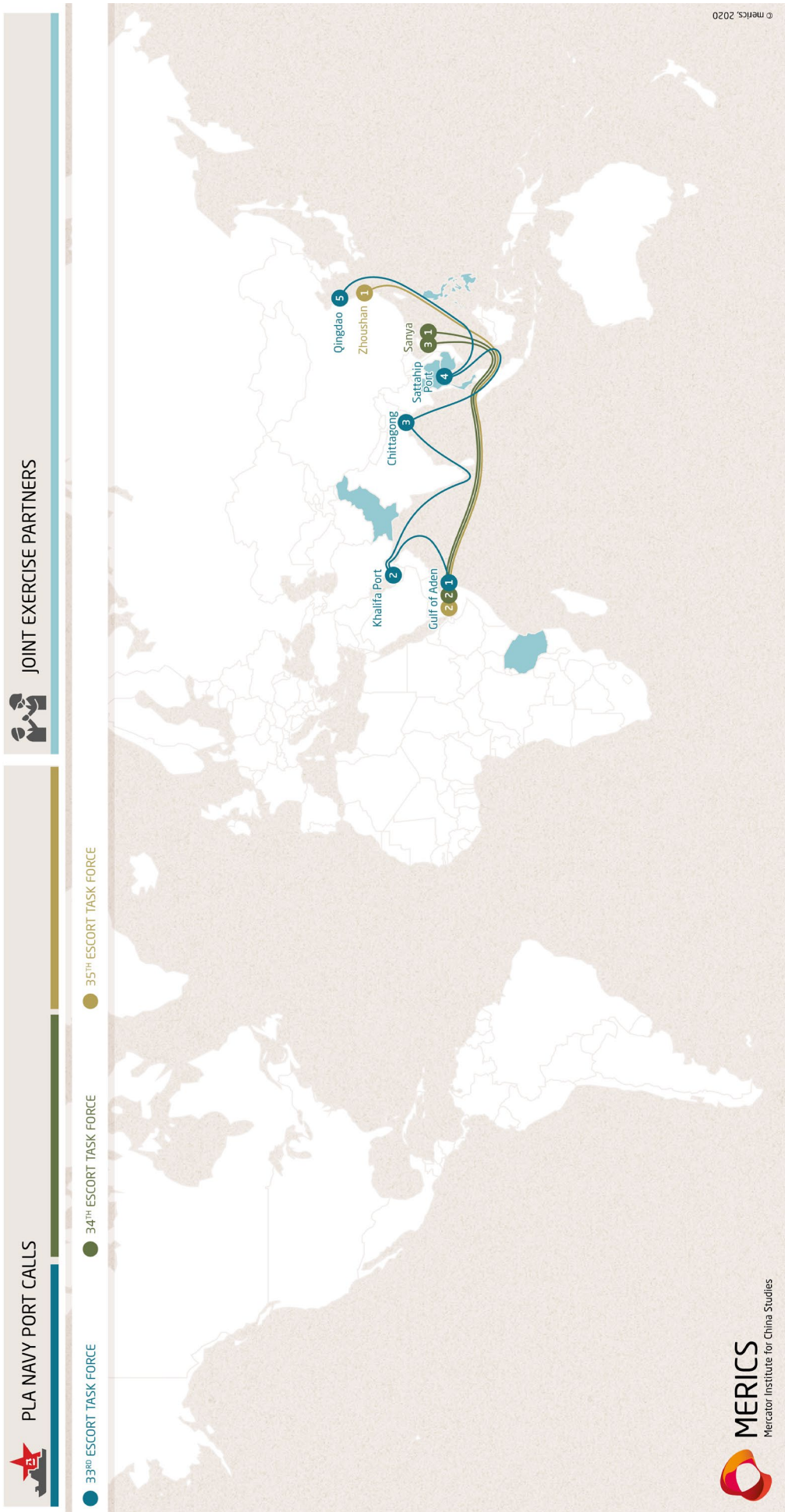
Military aid and training

- **PLA delivers medical supplies to 46 countries around the world.** In a bid to increase its influence and to demonstrate China's behavior as a responsible power, the PLA donated medical material to the ministries of defense of 46 countries, including masks, PPE and testing kits. Most donations went to countries located along the Belt and Road, in Southeast Asia, the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa.
- **National Defense University (NDU) offers online classes for foreign cadets.** The NDU's International College of Defense Studies launched an online system in late March in order to continue offering classes and training programs to foreign military officers unable to travel to China due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. The NDU reportedly also started offering modules on China's response to the pandemic and the concept of a human community with a shared destiny.



Port calls and joint exercises

- **Pandemic disrupts PLA participation in joint exercises with foreign militaries.** Between January and March, before Covid-19 forced the cancellation of planned drills and exercises, the PLA participated in five joint exercises with foreign militaries. Partner countries included Tanzania, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia. These exercises are among the PLA's main diplomatic tools. Their internal function is to contribute to transforming the PLA into a military that can “fight and win wars” by providing operational experience and insights into how other militaries operate.
- **PLAN port calls cancelled.** The PLA Navy (PLAN) drastically reduced the number of port calls between January and June. The Navy leadership reportedly canceled planned visits to reduce the risk of infection among PLAN personnel. The decision took account of the high number of Covid-19 infections on the US aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt after it made a port call at Da Nang, Vietnam, in March. Thereafter, PLAN port calls were limited to the three countries visited by the PLA Navy's 33rd escort task force returning from counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, namely the UAE, Bangladesh and Thailand. A fourth stop in India was reportedly axed. China's Coast Guard also sent a ship to the Philippines in mid-January for a meeting of the Joint Coast Guard Committee on Maritime Cooperation between the two countries' coast guards.



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Law enforcement cooperation

- **Joint Mekong River patrols continue.** China continued its participation in joint patrols of the Mekong River throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The monthly patrols, which include law enforcement personnel from China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, have been taking place for eight years. As of late June 2020, 94 such patrols have taken place.
- **China's extradition request rejected by Czech Constitutional Court.** On April 9, 2020, the Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic rejected the extradition to China of eight Taiwanese suspects who were accused by Beijing of telecom fraud. The court ruled that a 2018 decision by Prague's Municipal Court, and later upheld by the High Court, failed to take into account the lack of guarantees that the accused would be properly treated and protected from torture or degrading treatment if extradited to China.
- **China sent secret extradition request for Uighur man in Turkey.** According to documents obtained by the Axios news service, Beijing sent a secret request to Ankara in 2016 for the extradition of Enver Turdi, a Uighur man who has lived in Turkey since fleeing Xinjiang in 2014. Although the request was not formally marked as classified, Axios reported that China's government asked Turkish officials to keep the case a secret. The case documents therefore only came to light in 2020. Turkey and China signed a draft extradition treaty in 2017, but it has yet to be ratified by the Turkish Parliament.
- **Nepal, China signed secret agreement to hand over illegal migrants.** Nepal's Minister of Foreign Affairs confirmed in January that the two countries had signed an agreement to return any undocumented immigrants within seven days of their being arrested. The foreign ministry confirmed that the deal was signed during the October 2019 visit to Nepal by China's President Xi and kept secret since, thereby scotching previous reports that the Nepali government had refused to sign an extradition treaty with China. Many in Nepal fear that the agreement is designed to target Tibetan asylum seekers and refugees at Beijing's request.

FORCE PROJECTION

Military operations other than war

Peacekeeping operations

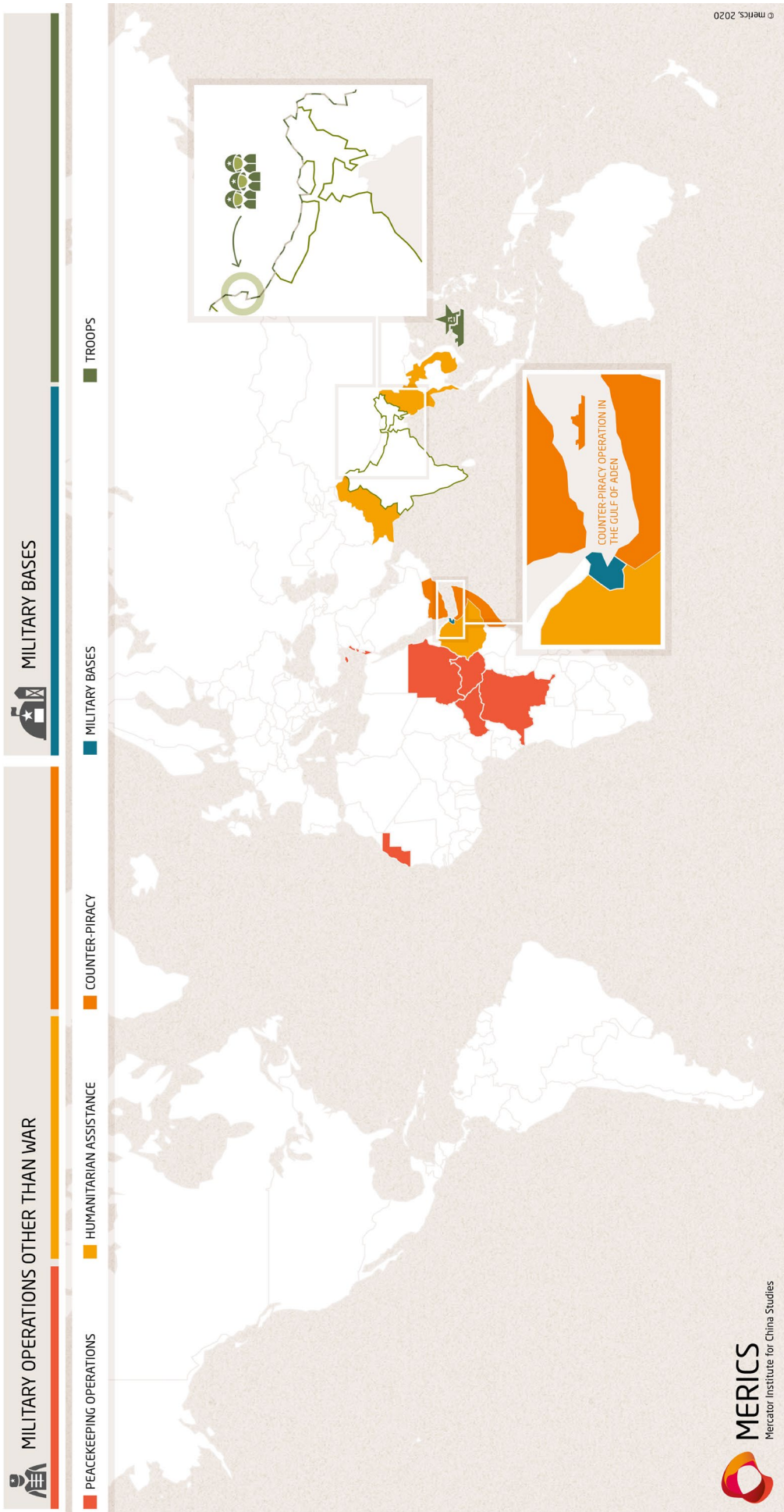
- **China marks 30 years of participation in UN peacekeeping operations.** China continued its participation in nine existing UN peacekeeping operations in the period between January and June. Total deployment remained broadly stable, hovering around the 2,500 personnel mark, as has been the case since 2017. China remains the largest contributor of personnel to UN peacekeeping operations among the permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). China's largest single ongoing participation in a UN peacekeeping mission remains South Sudan, where China had 1,073 personnel at the end of May. This year marks the 30th anniversary of Chinese participation in UN peacekeeping operations. Since China sent five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in the Middle East in 1990, it has deployed over 40,000 personnel in 25 different UN missions, according to official figures.

Counter-piracy

- China continues to take part in counter-piracy operations in Gulf of Aden. The PLA Navy's 34th and 35th escort task forces continued counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, including escorting and protecting commercial shipping. China sent its first task force to the region in 2008.

Humanitarian assistance/disaster Relief

- **PLA medical teams deploy abroad.** Chinese military medical teams were present in several countries in Africa and Southeast Asia between January and June on regular year-long deployments, which were not interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The deployments included that of the PLA's 6th medical team in Ethiopia and its 15th medical team in Cambodia. Both teams arrived in January and will remain based at local military hospitals in Addis Ababa and Phnom Penh, respectively, until January 2021. PLA teams were also present in Laos, Pakistan and Myanmar - where they helped the Myanmar Defense Services General Hospital to build a Covid-19 lab.



Force deployments

- **China-India border clash causes casualties.** Chinese and Indian troops clashed at the Galwan Valley on June 15, after several minor scuffles at their shared border in the Ladakh region since early May. The encounter did not involve gunfire, as guns are banned on that stretch of the disputed border. The two armies attacked each other with sticks and clubs. 20 Indian soldiers died, while the number of Chinese casualties remains uncertain. Both sides blamed the other for starting the incident, each accusing the other side of illegally crossing the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Both governments are now calling for a de-escalation of tensions. They scheduled two rounds of talks at the corps commander level for June 22 and June 28 to ease tensions and discuss disengagement at the standoff sites. The talks have so far been inconclusive. This was the worst clash between the Chinese and Indian armies since 1967 and is further proof of China's growing assertiveness in the region.
- **China keeps up pressure on Taiwan with military maneuvers.** Beijing continued to conduct military shows of strength around Taiwan. While world attention was fixed on combatting the novel coronavirus pandemic, China's military maneuvers have raised tensions. Between January and June, the PLA Air Force conducted over a dozen drills and flyovers around the island. On February 9-10, the PLA naval and air forces also conducted a joint drill in waters south of Taiwan. The US has also stepped up its presence in the region, sailing through the Taiwan Strait seven times between January and June, most recently on June 4, the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

Although Beijing says the maneuvers are "routine" exercises, China's 2019 Defense White Paper took the view that they were meant to "send a stern warning to the Taiwan independence separatist forces". Against the background of rising China-US tensions and the Covid-19 pandemic, these activities could also be seen as a show of force to signal to the US (and the rest of the world) that China's military is fully operational and remains focused on pursuing Beijing's geopolitical goals. At the same time, the drills could play well at home as a distraction from domestic pressures stemming from Beijing's handling of the pandemic and the ensuing economic slowdown.

- **PLA steps up activities in the East China Sea.** According to Japan's defense ministry, the Japan Air Self Defense Force scrambled jets 675 times to intercept PLA aircraft between April 1, 2019 and March 31, 2020, up 5.8 percent on the previous 12-month period. Most of the interceptions took place over the East China Sea. There was also an uptick in activity around the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands between January and June 2020. A Japanese destroyer collided with a Chinese fishing boat on March 30. Two Chinese Coast Guard ships chased a Japanese fishing vessel on May 8, as it was operating in the waters around the Senkaku Islands which Beijing claims as its own.

The PLA aircraft carrier Liaoning also sailed through the Miyako Strait, between the Japanese islands of Miyako and Okinawa, twice in April. Much like with the uptick in activities around Taiwan, this was a show of force by the PLA and an opportunistic move, taking advantage of Japan's distraction with the Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Chinese survey ship causes standoffs with Vietnam, Malaysia in the South China Sea.** Two weeks after a China Coast Guard (CCG) ship sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands in early April, Beijing once more sent the survey ship Haiyang Dizhi 8 into Vietnamese waters in the South China Sea, escorted by six Coast Guard ships. The same survey ship was at the heart of last year's standoff over Vanguard Bank. The Haiyang Dizhi 8 also entered waters near Malaysia with a CCG escort, where it proceeded to tag an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia's state oil company Petronas. China is taking advantage of the distraction caused by the coronavirus pandemic to expand its presence in the South China Sea.
- **The South China Sea is the main arena of competition between the US and PRC militaries.** The US has continued conducting freedom of navigation operations and passage exercises in the South China Sea. These have triggered strong responses from Beijing, which has deployed ships and aircraft to monitor and expel US forces from waters it claims as its own. Beijing has accused Washington of sabotaging peace and stability in the region, of violating China's sovereignty and of having hegemonic ambitions. Tensions in the region have worsened as relations between the US and China deteriorated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Out-of-area logistics

- **China's Djibouti base is reportedly ready for aircraft carriers.** Media reports published in May claimed that, based on available satellite images, China has expanded the port in its first overseas base in Djibouti. An article in British newspaper The Times suggested that the new 330 meter-long pier could accommodate either of China's aircraft carriers. The upgrade is further evidence that, although China refers to this base as a logistics support facility, it is in fact a military base.
- **PLA aircraft spotted at Fiery Cross Reef.** PLA Navy aircraft were spotted in May at the base on Fiery Cross Reef in the South China Sea. The planes reportedly included KJ-500 airborne early warning and control systems and KQ-200 maritime patrol aircraft, also known as Y-8 anti-submarine aircraft. These deployments show that Fiery Cross Reef has become the PLA's main operating base in the South China Sea at a time of growing hostilities in the region.
- **China completes deployment of the Beidou global satellite navigation system.** After a brief delay due to technical issues with the Long March 3B rocket, China launched the last satellite of the Beidou system on June 23. Now completed, Beidou provides global positioning services that will allow the PLA to increasingly decouple itself from the US-based GPS system. Beidou will also help China expand its international footprint and engagements if other countries switch to using Beidou instead of GPS.
- **China's milestone year in space hits a snag.** China's attempt to launch a new type of rocket on March 16 ended in failure, after the Long March 7A encountered an abnormality after take-off. A few weeks later, this was followed by the failure of one of China's most dependable rockets, the Long March 3B, raising questions over whether Beijing will be able to fulfil its space ambitions for 2020. According to the China National Space Administration, 2020 was due to be a milestone year. Important missions

planned included the launches of a new manned spacecraft prototype in April, the last Beidou satellite in May, a probe to Mars in July and the Chang'e-5 lunar probe later in the year. The first two tasks were successfully completed, although technical issues caused delays.

- **Serbia, China sign memorandum on space tech cooperation.** On June 5, Zhang Kejian, director of the China National Space Administration, and Nenad Popovic, Serbia's minister for innovation and technological development signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on space technology cooperation via video conference. Serbia, which is not a member of the European Space Agency, expressed hopes that China would share its space technology and know-how. Meanwhile, Zhang announced more modest goals; for instance, putting Serbia's flag on any future jointly designed spacecraft.
- **China-based group accused of hacking Asia-Pacific governments.** Research by cyber security firm Check Point has accused a China-based hacking group known as Naikon of carrying out a five-year espionage campaign against governments in the Asia-Pacific region. Targeted countries included Australia, Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. The group reportedly targeted ministries of foreign affairs, and ministries of science and technology, aiming to gather "geopolitical intelligence". Although Check Point does not draw a link between this group and the PLA, a separate 2015 report published by cyber security firm ThreatConnect and Defense Group Inc. tied Naikon to the PLA's 78020 unit.
- **PLA personnel charged with hacking into Equifax.** A US federal grand jury charged four members of the PLA on January 28 with hacking into the computer systems of the credit reporting agency Equifax in 2017, stealing Americans' personal data and the company's trade secrets. The accused are allegedly part of the PLA's 54th Research Institute, part of the PLA Strategic Support Force.

GLOBAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Influence in the UN

- **China, India spar over Kashmir discussions at the UN.** In mid-January, China requested the UN Security Council (UNSC) review of the situation in Kashmir, triggering a strong response from India, which maintains Kashmir is a bilateral issue between Delhi and Islamabad. The request failed, opposed by a number of other UNSC permanent members. However, it was further evidence of Beijing's displeasure with India's decision to strip Jammu and Kashmir of their special status in August 2019.
- **China blocks UNSC meeting on Hong Kong.** Beijing blocked a US effort to hold a UNSC meeting in late May on China's decision to impose a National Security Law on Hong Kong. China used its veto, saying Hong Kong was an internal affair and therefore beyond the mandate of the Security Council. China also accused the US of being "the troublemaker of the world," further stoking tensions between the two powers.

Non-proliferation

- **China to join Arms Trade Treaty.** China's National People's Congress Standing Committee voted on June 20 to join the Arms Trade Treaty. The treaty, in force since December 2014, governs cross-border trade in several types of conventional arms. China originally declined to join the treaty but has shifted its stance – seemingly in response to US President Trump's announcement that the US will quit the treaty.
- **China refuses invitation to join US-Russia meeting on New START.** Russia and the US invited China to attend talks held in Vienna in June to discuss extending their bilateral New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) Treaty, which is due to expire in February 2021. Amid rising tensions between Washington and Beijing, the Trump administration has pushed for China to be brought into any future deal, as it is concerned about the PRC's growing nuclear and missile capabilities.

However, Beijing has repeatedly rejected the invitation to attend the negotiations, arguing that the US and Russia – as the countries with the biggest nuclear stockpiles – have a responsibility to disarm first, before asking other countries to do the same. After the June meeting failed to deliver concrete results, the PLA Daily published articles blaming the US for letting arms control become a "hostage" of its domestic politics and praising Russia's sincere and positive attitude during the talks.

- **US report claims China may have conducted banned nuclear tests.** A report by the US State Department, first cited by the Wall Street Journal in April, suggests China may have conducted underground nuclear tests throughout 2019 at the Lop Nur testing site in Xinjiang province. This would contravene the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT); China is a CTBT signatory, though it has not ratified the treaty. Beijing dismissed the allegations and Washington has not made an official accusation.
- **Global Times calls to expand nuclear arsenal triggers domestic debate.** Nationalist tabloid The Global Times published a May 8 article by its editor-in-chief, Hu Xijin, calling for China to increase its nuclear warheads to 1,000. It triggered strong domestic

debate, attracting praise from social media users, though experts from think tanks and academia were more critical. Hu was accused of focusing solely on catching up with the US amid rising tensions, while ignoring China's own stance and policies on nuclear weapons. Military analysts defended China's "small and lean" arsenal, saying China needs higher-quality, more effective nuclear weapons, not a nuclear arms race with the US.

- **India reportedly stops Chinese ship carrying nuclear-capable equipment to Pakistan.** Media reports claim customs officials at Kandla Port seized an industrial autoclave from a Chinese ship in early February as it was en route to Karachi, Pakistan. The autoclave was considered a dual-use component, as it could be used to manufacture motors for long-range ballistic missiles. China has long been accused of helping its ally Pakistan with the development of nuclear missile delivery platforms.
- **China says it will respond if the US deploys missiles to Asia Pacific.** A defense ministry spokesperson said China is strongly opposed to US plans to deploy intermediate-range missiles to the Asia-Pacific region, following the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 2019, when the Trump Administration withdrew. He announced that Beijing would view a deployment as a provocation and would respond to counteract it.

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