

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Chinese leader Xi Jinping says he is preparing for war. At the annual meeting of China's parliament and its top political advisory body in March, Xi wove the theme of war readiness through four separate speeches, in one instance telling his generals to "dare to fight." His government also announced a 7.2 percent increase in China's defense budget, which has doubled over the last decade, as well as plans to make the country less dependent on foreign grain imports. And in recent months, Beijing has unveiled new military readiness laws, new air-raid shelters in cities across the strait from Taiwan, and new "National Defense Mobilization" offices countrywide.

It is too early to say for certain what these developments mean. Conflict is not certain or imminent. But something has changed in Beijing that policymakers and business leaders worldwide cannot afford to ignore. If Xi says he is readying for war, it would be foolish not to take him at his word.

WEEPING GHOSTS, QUAKING ENEMIES

The first sign that this year's meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference—known as the “two-sessions” because both bodies meet simultaneously—might not be business as usual came on March 1, when the top theoretical journal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published an essay titled “Under the Guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Strengthening the Army, We Will Advance Victoriously.” The essay appeared under the name “Jun Zheng”—a homonym for “military government” that possibly refers to China's top military body, the Central Military Commission—and argued that “the modernization of national defense and the military must be accelerated.” It also called for an intensification of Military-Civil Fusion, Xi's policy requiring private companies and civilian institutions to serve China's military modernization effort. And riffing off a speech that Xi made to Chinese military leaders in October 2022, it made lightly veiled jabs at the United States:

In the face of wars that may be imposed on us, we must speak to enemies in a language they understand and use victory to win peace and respect. In the new era, the People's Army insists on using force to stop fighting. . . . Our army is famous for being good at fighting and having a strong fighting spirit. With millet and rifles, it defeated the Kuomintang army equipped with American equipment. It defeated the world's number one enemy armed to the teeth on the Korean battlefield, and performed mighty and majestic battle dramas that shocked the world and caused ghosts and gods to weep.

Even before the essay's publication, there were indications that Chinese leaders could be planning for a possible conflict. In December, Beijing promulgated a new law that would enable the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to more easily activate its reserve forces and institutionalize a system for replenishing combat troops in the event of war. Such measures, as the analysts Lyle Goldstein and Nathan Waechter have noted, suggest that Xi may have drawn lessons about military mobilization from Russian President Vladimir Putin's failures in Ukraine.

The law governing military reservists is not the only legal change that hints at Beijing's preparations. In February, the top deliberative body of

the National People's Congress adopted the Decision on Adjusting the Application of Certain Provisions of the [Chinese] Criminal Procedure Law to the Military During Wartime, which, according to the state-run *People's Daily*, gives the Central Military Commission the power to adjust legal provisions, including “jurisdiction, defense and representation, compulsory measures, case filings, investigation, prosecution, trial, and the implementation of sentences.” Although it is impossible to predict how the decision will be used, it could become a weapon to target individuals who oppose a takeover of Taiwan. The PLA might also use it to claim legal jurisdiction over a potentially occupied territory, such as Taiwan. Or Beijing could use it to compel Chinese citizens to support its decisions during wartime.

Since December, the Chinese government has also opened a slew of National Defense Mobilization offices—or recruitment centers—across the country, including in Beijing, Fujian, Hubei, Hunan, Inner Mongolia, Shandong, Shanghai, Sichuan, Tibet, and Wuhan. At the same time, cities in Fujian Province, across the strait from Taiwan, have begun building or upgrading air-raid shelters and at least one “wartime emergency hospital,” according to Chinese state media. In March, Fujian and several cities in the province began preventing overseas IP addresses from accessing government websites, possibly to impede tracking of China's preparations for war.

#### XI'S INNER VLAD

If these developments hint at a shift in Beijing's thinking, the two-sessions meetings in early March all but confirmed one. Among the proposals discussed by the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference—the advisory body—was a plan to create a blacklist of pro-independence activists and political leaders in Taiwan. Tabled by the popular ultranationalist blogger Zhou Xiaoping, the plan would authorize the assassination of blacklisted individuals—including Taiwan's vice president, William Lai Ching-te—if they do not reform their ways. Zhou later told the Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao* that his proposal had been accepted by the conference and “relayed to relevant authorities for evaluation and

consideration.” Proposals like Zhou’s do not come by accident. In 2014, Xi praised Zhou for the “positive energy” of his jeremiads against Taiwan and the United States.

Also at the two-sessions meetings, outgoing Premier Li Keqiang announced a military budget of 1.55 trillion yuan (roughly \$224.8 billion) for 2023, a 7.2 percent increase from last year. Li, too, called for heightened “preparations for war.” Western experts have long believed that China underreports its defense expenditures. In 2021, for instance, Beijing claimed it spent \$209 billion on defense, but the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute put the true figure at \$293.4 billion. Even the official Chinese figure exceeds the military spending of all the Pacific treaty allies of the United States combined (Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand), and it is a safe bet China is spending substantially more than it says.

But the most telling moments of the two-sessions meetings, perhaps unsurprisingly, involved Xi himself. The Chinese leader gave four speeches in all—one to delegates of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, two to the National People’s Congress, and one to military and paramilitary leaders. In them, he described a bleak geopolitical landscape, singled out the United States as China’s adversary, exhorted private businesses to serve China’s military and strategic aims, and reiterated that he sees uniting Taiwan and the mainland as vital to the success of his signature policy to achieve “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese ethnos.”

In his first speech on March 6, Xi appeared to be girding China’s industrial base for struggle and conflict. “In the coming period, the risks and challenges we face will only increase and become more severe,” he warned. “Only when all the people think in one place, work hard in one place, help each other in the same boat, unite as one, dare to fight, and be good at fighting, can they continue to win new and greater victories.” To help the CCP achieve these “greater victories,” he vowed to “correctly guide” private businesses to invest in projects that the state has prioritized.

Xi also blasted the United States directly in his speech, breaking his practice of not naming Washington as an adversary except in historical

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contexts. He described the United States and its allies as leading causes of China's current problems. "Western countries headed by the United States have implemented containment from all directions, encirclement and suppression against us, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development," he said. Whereas U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has emphasized "guardrails" and other means of slowing the deterioration of U.S.-China relations, Beijing is clearly preparing for a new, more confrontational era.

On March 5, Xi gave a second speech laying out a vision of Chinese self-sufficiency that went considerably further than any of his previous discussions of the topic, saying China's march to modernization is contingent on breaking technological dependence on foreign economies—meaning the United States and other industrialized democracies. Xi also said that he wants China to end its reliance on imports of grain and manufactured goods. "In case we're short of either, the international market will not protect us," Xi declared. Li, the outgoing premier, emphasized the same point in his annual government "work report" on the same day, saying Beijing must "unremittingly keep the rice bowls of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people firmly in their own hands." China currently depends on imports for more than a third of its net food consumption.

In his third speech, on March 8 to representatives from the PLA and the People's Armed Police, Xi declared that China must focus its innovation efforts on bolstering national defense and establish a network of national reserve forces that could be tapped in wartime. Xi also called for a "National Defense Education" campaign to unite society behind the PLA, invoking as inspiration the Double Support Movement, a 1943 campaign by the Communists to militarize society in their base area of Yan'an.

In his fourth speech (and his first as a third-term president), on March 13, Xi announced that the "essence" of his great rejuvenation campaign

was “the unification of the motherland.” Although he has hinted at the connection between absorbing Taiwan and his much-vaunted campaign to, essentially, make China great again, he has rarely if ever done so with such clarity.

#### TAKING XI SERIOUSLY

One thing that is clear a decade into Xi’s rule is that it is important to take him seriously—something that many U.S. analysts regrettably do not do. When Xi launched a series of aggressive campaigns against corruption, private enterprise, financial institutions, and the property and tech sectors, many analysts predicted that these campaigns would be short-lived. But they endured. The same was true of Xi’s draconian “zero COVID” policy for three years—until he was uncharacteristically forced to reverse course in late 2022.

Xi is now intensifying a decadelong campaign to break key economic and technological dependencies on the U.S.-led democratic world. He is doing so in anticipation of a new phase of ideological and geostrategic “struggle,” as he puts it. His messaging about war preparation and his equating of national rejuvenation with unification mark a new phase in his political warfare campaign to intimidate Taiwan. He is clearly willing to use force to take the island. What remains unclear is whether he thinks he can do so without risking uncontrolled escalation with the United States.