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THE EPOCH TIMES

# CHINA INSIDER

ROSALINDAMAN/AP VIA GETTY IMAGES

## ANOTHER CCP OFFICIAL DISAPPEARS

MISSING CHINESE DEFENSE MINISTER

See Page 4

Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu salutes the audience before delivering a speech during the 20th Shangri-La Dialogue summit in Singapore on June 4, 2023



CCP INFIGHTING | IN-DEPTH

# China’s Claim of Foreign Territories in New Map Linked to Troubles Within CCP, Say Experts

*The timing of China’s publication of a new map indicates a power struggle within the ruling Communist Party, experts say*

By Venus Upadhayaya

NEW DELHI—The new map released by the Chinese Ministry of Natural Resources on Aug. 28 has claimed the territories of multiple Asia-Pacific countries, triggering protests from all except Russia.

Experts opined that the map is more than cartographic diplomacy. Some noted that the timing of its publication indicates the power struggles between political factions within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Moreover, experts say the only way to counter Beijing’s hegemonic ambition is for the encroached countries to contain the regime collectively.

“While there is a big difference between lines on the map and line making on [the] ground, the significance of the map cannot be underplayed,” professor Dibyesh Anand—China and Tibet expert and head of the School of Social Sciences at London’s University of Westminster—told The Epoch Times in an email.

The “2023 Edition of the Standard Map of China” shows old and new territorial claims.

The territories claimed in the new map as part of the “National Mapping Awareness Publicity Week” belong to India, Russia, Vietnam, Philippines, and Taiwan and directly impact other countries like Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

While the territorial claim of Indian lands, such as Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin, is nothing new, the CCP has, for the first time, laid claim over the largely uninhabited Russian island of Ostrov Bolshoy Ussuriysky, also known as the Heixiazhi Island or Great Ussuri Island.

According to the “Legal Annex Relating to the Eastern Sino-Russian Border”—signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and then-CCP leader Hu Jintao in 2004 and ratified by China in 2005—the island was divided between the two countries after Moscow handed over the western part of the island to Beijing in 2008.

“The eastern tip of that island, now claimed by China in its entirety, is just opposite the lone (in the Far East) Russian city of Khabarovsk. There is even a small Russian village of Ussuriskiy with a smallish river harbor on the eastern tip of Heixiazhi Island, right opposite Khabarovsk. This would make the Russians living in that little village ‘Chinese,’” Frank Lehberger, a Germany-based sinologist, told The Epoch Times.

**‘We Reject These Claims’**

In addition to the Indian and Russian territories, Beijing has claimed almost the entirety of the South China Sea and a “10-dash line” to the east of Taiwan. Since the map was released, formal complaints against the map have been lodged by India, Malaysia,



▲ China’s new map issued on Aug. 28, 2023, has claimed the entire Bolshoy Ussuriysky island, which, according to an earlier agreement, was divided between Russia and China.



▲ A map designed by China includes an insert with nine dash lines showing the Chinese regime’s claimed territory in the South China Sea, in Beijing on June 15, 2016.

Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Russia is yet to respond, and the United States has called it “unlawful.”

“We have today lodged a strong protest through diplomatic channels with the Chinese side on the so called [sic] 2023 ‘standard map’ of China that lays claim to India’s territory,” India’s External Affairs Ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi said in a first complaint statement on Aug. 29.

India and China are facing a tense border situation since the bloody trans-Himalayan conflict of Galwan in 2020, which has increasingly led to military buildup on both sides of the thousands-mile-long Himalayan border.

“We reject these claims as they have no basis. Such steps by the Chinese side only complicate the resolution of the boundary question,” said Mr. Bagchi.

Malaysia’s complaint came on Aug. 30, and its foreign ministry said that China’s claims are “unilateral” and the map is “not binding” to the nation.

**Rift and Nationalism**

The new map touches on the nationalistic sentiment of the Chinese people, and the timing of its release gives a glimpse of the situation within the CCP, where various cliques continuously compete for power, said experts.

“This map is hyper-politically correct in China and some sort of proof of absolute patriotism and loyalty to Xi dogma. It was issued by the Ministry of Natural Resources, not the foreign ministry. So this is also some intra-CCP contest of who is the [most loyal] of them all,” said Mr. Lehberger.

Claude Arpi, an Indian-based Tibetologist,

French-born author, and historian, believes the map represents a rift within the CCP.

“I don’t think that Xi is the boss today in China and that he has full control over all the ministries. Qin Gang is proof of it. My only guess is that perhaps a party [that opposes] him wants to exacerbate the division with the neighbors by republishing the map,” Mr. Arpi told The Epoch Times in an email.

The map was published immediately before Chinese leader Xi Jinping skipped the G20 summit in India and the 18th ASEAN summit in Jakarta earlier this month. Mr. Arpi believes the timing was significant.

“The publication of the map at that particular time looks like a sort of sabotage of Xi’s foreign tour,” said Mr. Arpi, adding that things haven’t been looking favorable for Mr. Xi after the Beidaihe conclave last month.

He particularly drew attention to the 19th round of unsuccessful border negotiations between India and China in mid-August.

The Beidaihe conclave, or “summer summit,” is held annually between July and August and attended by current and former top echelons of the CCP who conduct informal negotiations, discuss major national policies, and finalize decisions.

“There is nothing ‘new’ in the map recently published by China, as far as India is concerned. China claimed the same territories as in its map of 1960. The question is why was it necessary to reiterate these claims now at a time when the negotiations in Ladakh have reached a crucial point,” wrote Mr. Arpi.

The expert believes that Mr. Xi can’t afford to look weak by accepting the Indian position on the border.

“In all probability, Xi Jinping can’t afford to give away anything in Depsang and Demchok and admit that he changed the status quo in May 2020 in Ladakh due to internal problems within the CCP,” said Mr. Arpi.

The fact that China’s communist regime is ready to take on several nations at a time by reaffirming its territory shows a gap between what Mr. Xi professes and the reality of Beijing’s “official” position, he said.

“When this split takes place in China, it often means that there are two views strongly opposing each other, the hardcore nationalist position (often led by the People’s Liberation Army) and the ‘diplomatic view.’ Again, it means a deep division among the top leadership. This would explain why Xi desisted [from attending] the ASEAN and the G20 meetings and decided instead to send his premier, who is very new to diplomacy,” wrote Mr. Arpi.

However, professor Anand said that there are rumors of tensions among the CCP’s top leadership due to China’s economic slowdown, but given Mr. Xi’s paramount authority and the shared belief of leaders in the survival of the Party being the primary goal, he is unlikely to face a serious challenge.

“From the very beginning, Xi’s leadership has been using stronger nationalism, and I see these changes as continuity of that rather than a rupture from the past,” he wrote in an email.

**Once a maximalist claim is made on an official map, the stakes are high in boundary negotiations, and one can expect China to be rigid in bargaining at best and militarily aggressive on the ground at worst.**

Dibyesh Anand, head of the School of Social Sciences, University of Westminster

**‘China’s Claim Could Expand in the Future’**

The new map doesn’t tally with the actual cartography of the Asia-Pacific region, which indicates that the CCP has plans to expand its territorial claims, leading to increased border conflicts, according to the experts.

“Not necessarily some ‘war’ but surely some armed clashes,” said Mr. Lehberger.

Mr. Anand said the new map indicates that the Chinese cartography is more “beligerent” than in the past.

“Once a maximalist claim is made on an official map, the stakes are high in boundary negotiations, and one can expect China to be rigid in bargaining at best and militarily aggressive on the ground at worst,” said Mr. Anand.

Satoru Nagao, a nonresident fellow with the Hudson Institute, told The Epoch Times in an email that the new map also conveys that if a nation challenges Beijing’s territorial stance, a war could break out.

“That is a clear message,” he said. “China’s claim could expand in the future.”

According to Mr. Nagao, Beijing does not trust anyone, including its close ally, Moscow.

“Because Russia relies on China now, China expanded [its] claim [of Russian territory] without hesitation. Russia needs to fight in Ukraine. To do this, the supply line through China is vital,” he wrote.

**Diplomatic Countenance**

Experts said the only way to discourage Chinese cartographic aggression and border conflict is by forging multilateral strategic alliances that work together for diplomatic countenance.

“When affected countries lodge diplomatic protests but do not follow up with any action [to counter China] ... that is a success for China. Protesting states seem to do little to inform world opinion about China’s cartographical expansionism,” said Mr. Anand.

Mr. Nagao said that since Beijing ignores the current global order based on international law, the incumbent countries could repeatedly emphasize rule-based order in their joint statement.

“This time, India, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, [and] Taiwan have criticized China’s claim,” he said. “The real response should be the cooperation of countries around China. They should strengthen their military power to contain China’s claim. If such a map creates a new NATO in Asia, China will not publish such a map so easily [again],” the expert said.

Mr. Nagao said the Asia-Pacific nations should understand the significance of such cooperation to contain communist China, whose military expenditure increased by 76 percent from 2011 to 2020 while the U.S. defense budget decreased by 10 percent in the same period.

“If countries around China cooperate with each other and possess strike capabilities like cruise missiles, China’s military expenditure will need to be divided in multiple directions. Thus, cooperation is an important factor to deal with China’s territorial expansion,” he wrote.

Beijing’s territorial expansion claim also consists of a non-military factor, according to Mr. Nagao. He believes China’s economic rise is the crux of the CCP’s military and cartographic aggression, allowing it to increase its defense budget rapidly.

“Because China is rich, China can invest in infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative and create debt for recipients and control them. Thus, reducing China’s income is the main [way to] counter China’s policy. That is why many countries are focusing on economic security,” he said.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership, a proposed free trade agreement between the 12 Pacific economies, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity launched by the United States last year are meant to create alternative markets and limit China’s access to Western technologies, according to Mr. Nagao.

The success of all these frameworks is meant to contain the Chinese regime’s multifaceted aggression, including its cartographic transgressions, he said.

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ANALYSIS

# Chinese Defense Minister’s Disappearance Points to CCP Turmoil

By Eva Fu

The mysterious disappearance of China's defense chief just months after he ascended to the post is fueling questions about his fate and the stability of the Chinese Communist Party.

Li Shangfu, who was handpicked by Chinese leader Xi Jinping for the role in March, has been missing from public view for more than two weeks; his last appearance was on Aug. 29, when he delivered a keynote address to African defense officials at a security forum in Beijing.

A stream of reports citing sources in China and U.S. officials suggest that Mr. Li has been stripped of his responsibilities and is possibly under investigation for corruption, which would make him the fourth senior Chinese official falling from grace less than a year into Mr. Xi's third term.

The unexplained absence, after Mr. Li unexpectedly pulled out of a meeting with Vietnamese counterparts in recent weeks, follows a pattern amid the summer of abrupt reshuffling that shook the top echelons of Chinese communist leadership, among them the surprise ouster of former Foreign Minister Qin Gang.

Also a Xi protégé, Mr. Qin vanished from the public eye for a month after holding the role for seven months. With no explanation, his predecessor, Wang Yi, took over the post in July, while Mr. Qin's records briefly disappeared from the Foreign Ministry website.

In a similar fashion, Mr. Xi last month also dismissed two generals controlling the Rocket Force, the country's nuclear arsenal and conventional missile force. Gen. Li Yuchao, the former Rocket Force head, also missed the military unit's promotion ceremony in late June. The removal of two such high-level officials and the choice of their replacements, coming from outside that branch, strike longtime China observers such as Gordon Chang as unprecedented. "Something's going on," said Mr. Chang, author of "The Coming Collapse of China" and an Epoch Times contributor, noting that he sees it as a sign of "turbulence inside the Chinese regime."

Mr. Xi, he said, might have "just decided to change his mind, or it could be that Xi Jinping's enemies were able to get rid of one of Xi Jinping's appointees."

"In communist party politics, you go after the underlings first, you work your way up the chain, and then eventually, the position of your target becomes untenable," Mr. Chang told The Epoch Times.

What makes the situation puzzling is the fact that all the recent removals involve Mr. Xi's appointees, whose backgrounds, without a question, would have been "thoroughly scrutinized before they were appointed," June Teufel Dreyer, a political science professor at the University of Miami, told The Epoch Times.

With "both their loyalty to Xi and their relative honesty were presumably certified," she asked, "how could either lack of loyalty or presence of corruption be so suddenly discovered?"

"They cast doubt on the entire appointment process," she said.

## 'Warning Sign'

Piecing everything together, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) considers the developments

Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu attends the 20th IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on June 2, 2023.

In securing his grip on power, the Chinese leader has made influential enemies in the military and the senior leadership circle.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a reporter on Sept. 15 who asked about Mr. Li's status and whether he's under investigation that she was "not aware of the situation you mentioned."

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang (2nd R) attends a meeting in Metro Manila, Philippines, on April 22, 2023.



CAROLINE CHIA/REUTERS

in China to be part of Mr. Xi's effort to consolidate control.

"The unexpected disappearance of Xi Jinping's former defense minister, the sudden replacement of the Rocket Force leadership, the mysterious vanishings of Chinese scientists amid the COVID pandemic, and the disappearance of his foreign minister earlier this year, is a warning sign of how far he is willing to go to maintain his authoritarian grip on power," he told The Epoch Times. "Xi's purge will continue against anyone he sees as a potential threat."

The regime has been tight-lipped on Mr. Li's prolonged absence.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a reporter on Sept. 15 who asked about Mr. Li's status and whether he's under investigation that she was "not aware of the situation you mentioned."

Ms. Mao could have responded in the negative if nothing had happened, independent political commentator Cai Shen-kun noted.

"Wouldn't that snuff out the rumors once and for all?" he told The Epoch Times. "From the way she responded, something must have happened. No question about that."

The exchange was scrubbed from the transcript later released on the ministry's website. A similar erasure occurred late last year amid nationwide protests and calls for a regime change amid Beijing's harsh COVID-19 curbs. Zhao Lijian, a spokesperson for the ministry at the time, apparently was at a loss for words during a press briefing when asked whether authorities would lift the control measures.

After a long pause, he asked to have the question repeated, and asserted that the question "does not reflect what actually

happened." That conversation was never published, although videos were leaked. That marked one of his last public appearances before his reassignment to a backroom role in January.

The secrecy around the leadership changes doesn't surprise Sen. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.).

"Authoritarian regimes like Communist China maintain complete and total control over the media and cover up the truth to control public discourse," she told The Epoch Times. "While the circumstances are unclear, we know China's playbook is to disappear top leaders and that Xi is under tremendous pressure, given the state of China's economy."

At about the same time as the Rocket Force shakeup, Chinese state media revealed that two high-ranking military officials, Lt. Gens. Wu Guohua and Wang Shaojun, the Rocket Force's former deputy commander and the top bodyguard to the regime's top leaders respectively, had died of unspecified illnesses. The months-long delay in the announcement in Mr. Wu's case, and the lack of clarity surrounding both, sparked speculation that the two had killed themselves.

To Mr. Chang, none of these are isolated incidents.

"They're all part of the continuing purge, and the Chinese regime is eating itself," he said.

Even if the successive dismissals bear no adverse impact on China's assertive foreign policy or its defense buildup, it does not bode well for the Chinese regime.

"They are likely to have an adverse effect on morale among the upper echelons of the party and military," Ms. Teufel Dreyer said.

## 'Enemies on All Sides'

Concerns about the political turmoil might have led Mr. Xi to skip the G20 summit in New Delhi, Mr. Chang said, rather than a wish to snub the host country or to avoid meeting with President Joe Biden, as some analysts have suggested.

"I think it's more likely that he felt that the situation in Beijing was too volatile and that it was dangerous for him to leave," he said. "The Chinese leaders are very concerned about assassination—always have been, and I think Xi Jinping has probably more so."

What appears striking to Mr. Chang is that all of these signs of political instability are occurring at the beginning of Xi Jinping's third term, a term that "a lot of people in Beijing thought he should not have."

Echoing Mr. Chang's views, Mr. Cai cited the Wagner rebellion in Russia, which he believes has put Mr. Xi on higher alert. In securing his grip on power, he said, the Chinese leader has made influential enemies in the military and the senior leadership circle.

"He has enemies on all sides," Mr. Cai said.

In a state of insecurity, a small incident could be the incentive for Mr. Xi to open



MARCO LONGARI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Chinese leader Xi Jinping during the 2023 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg on Aug. 24, 2023.

The most outspoken official on the issue so far has been Rahm Emanuel, U.S. ambassador to Japan.

State Antony Blinken, who in June became the highest-ranking U.S. official to visit China under the Biden administration, said at a press conference with his German counterpart, Annalena Baerbock, on Sept. 15.

"We remain fully prepared, as we've been, to engage with the Chinese government, whoever happens to be holding the positions of responsibility at any given time, just as I did when I went to Beijing earlier this summer. And we expect that to continue irrespective of who's holding what portfolio."

National security adviser Jake Sullivan on Sept. 15 said, "I don't have anything for you today on that."

The Pentagon told The Epoch Times that "the [Department of Defense] continues to believe in the importance of maintaining open lines of military-to-military communication between the United States and the PRC across multiple levels, including the senior-most levels."

The most outspoken official on the issue so far has been Rahm Emanuel, U.S. ambassador to Japan.

"President Xi's cabinet lineup is now resembling Agatha Christie's novel 'And Then There Were None,'" he wrote on social media platform X on Sept. 7. "First, Foreign Minister Qin Gang goes missing, then the Rocket Force commanders go missing, and now Defense Minister Li Shangfu hasn't been seen in public for two weeks. Who's

going to win this unemployment race? China's youth or Xi's cabinet?"

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby responded that he would "let the ambassador speak to his social media account" when asked whether the White House endorses Mr. Emanuel's message.

"We've long been clear about our concerns about a full range of worrisome [People's Republic of China] activities in the region there. And I think I'd leave it at that," he told reporters.

Mr. Li isn't the only one noted for his conspicuous absence this month.

Wang Yi, the most senior Chinese diplomat who has returned as the foreign minister, was a no-show at G20. On Sept. 15, the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, without mentioning Mr. Wang, said Vice President Han Zheng will represent Beijing at the U.N. General Assembly's annual high-level debate, a role that Mr. Wang had assumed last year.

The communist leader entered the BRICS conference venue in South Africa while his aide, believed to be a translator, was shut outside the door by the security guards.

Such mishaps have likely stirred Mr. Xi's anger toward the foreign minister, who would have oversight on his itinerary, according to exiled Chinese scholar Yuan Hongbing. Citing insider sources, he said Mr. Wang had been reprimanded following Mr. Xi's South Africa trip.

During the Sept. 15 press conference, Ms. Mao didn't confirm or deny Mr. Wang's reported plan to travel to Moscow, saying only that "China and Russia have been in close communication."

It's unclear where the unexplained moves will end, "but the regime will certainly be weakened," according to Mr. Chang.

"And it could actually even lead to the failure of the regime," he said. "At this point, that's unlikely, but that's a real possibility."

Luo Ya contributed to this report.

4<sup>th</sup> OFFICIAL

Reports suggest that Mr. Li has been stripped of his responsibilities and is possibly under investigation, which would make him the fourth senior Chinese official to fall from grace within a year.



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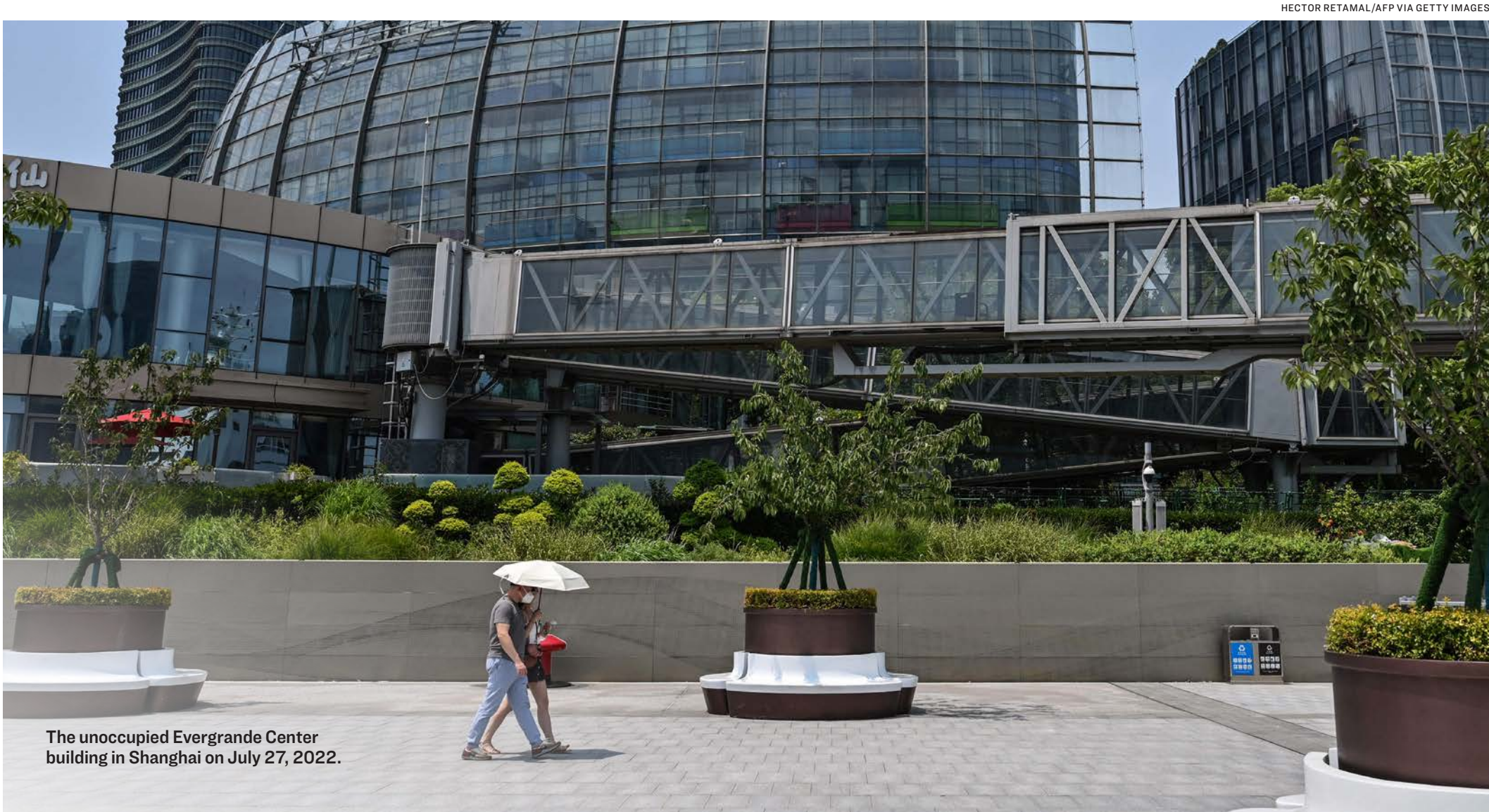
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The unoccupied Evergrande Center building in Shanghai on July 27, 2022.

OPINION

# Why Foreign Investment Is Leaving China and What It Means

Foreign investors looking to invest in Chinese stocks have learned the hard way that Chinese stocks have been roughly flat for 20 years.

By Christopher Balding



Foreign investors are fleeing China. Portfolio investment that flows into traded stocks and bonds has turned negative, and so has foreign direct investment, which goes into building plants and businesses.

Why have investors suddenly turned so negative on China? What impact will this have on the longer-term Chinese economy?

Whether investment in China or other investments, there isn't one reason but rather a host of reasons that an investment is either made or rejected. Investors, whether hedge fund managers or multinational corporations building a plant, are motivated by money. For years, the Chinese market has been seen as an instant money maker, and the market is continually just out of reach.

Companies operating in China typically had to enter into joint ventures or turn over their competitive edge, such as technology, which many quickly found was siphoned off into other companies or competitors. Foreign banks and asset managers always anticipated the grand market opening that had never come, where they could compete for business. Chinese bureaucrats were skilled at offering just enough to keep businesses interested but rarely gave anything of substance. Foreign investors looking to invest in Chinese stocks have learned the hard way that Chinese stocks have been roughly flat for 20 years. The first problem China faces is that too many investors have been burned in China.

Politics has contributed to the outflows. Before Chinese leader Xi Jinping took office and even in the early years of his rule, foreign businesses operating in China made enough money to compensate for the risks and trade-offs necessary. However, to use a clean dividing line, with the fabricated detention of Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, the approach to foreigners and foreign business changed.

After the global financial crisis, a China posting by an ambitious junior multinational corporation executive was seen as a requirement for an aspiring senior executive. Coupled with

Investors are not making money in China, and the politics just compounds the risks, which are unlikely to change any time soon.

the cushy pay packets, business and labor were anxious to take the first flight out. With businesses required to provide government access to pretty much all technology, internal emails and networks, draconian national security laws, and a highly protected market, the multitude of risks facing foreign businesses has driven many to say that the difficulties just aren't worth the potential profits.

Chinese business faces the gravity constraints of the state: A Chinese business will remain a Chinese business. An international company deciding where to invest, source from, or build has many options, including Vietnam, India, Germany, and the United States. China now has to compete for international mobile capital; so far, it doesn't appear to be interested in competing.

So what are the implications of foreign investment leaving China?

None of them are good for China or the rest of the world.

China benefited enormously from opening its markets. From the spill-over effects it gained from local firms and workers competing against and working for foreign firms to the flow of technology and hard currency, China gained significant benefits from direct interaction with foreign business and trade.

With foreign business and investment looking for other destinations, there are a number of clear implications. First, companies will become less of an advocate for China. In reality, China outsources many of its quasi-lobbying efforts of democracies to companies and institutions in the country. It will be much harder for businesses to lobby their representatives or other companies when they go elsewhere.

Second, look for investment and trade to diversify away from China and into other countries. India and Vietnam, as well as other Southeast Asian destinations, are benefiting from companies leaving China. International trade and investment don't vanish; they seek new destinations.

Third, expect China to become increasingly restrictive on existing business and investment, both domestic and international, whether it's entering or leaving. The People's Bank of China just recently announced

verification measures for even state-owned enterprises making purchases of U.S. dollars more than \$50 million. Though many expect China to reverse course and seek out international capital flows, this simply doesn't grasp the nature of the situation in China.

Fourth, expect China to continue to experience weak productivity growth. Foreign enterprises, and even private Chinese enterprises, are the most productive and innovative businesses in China. With private enterprises and foreign businesses pulling down or facing sharp restrictions, this will hamper innovation and depress already low productivity growth rates. Don't expect China to stop growing, however, neither should we expect a healthy, dynamic, competitive economy.

Fifth, as investors leave, expect Beijing to tighten restrictions on foreign exchange transactions. The Chinese are already utilizing various methods to help move U.S. dollars out of China or ensure that they never enter, causing headaches for the Chinese foreign exchange regulator. China desperately needs U.S. dollars to keep international trade flowing and money growing. This means that regulators will continue tightening up on trade and capital flows to ensure that they achieve their desired balance. If they aren't getting as much from abroad, that means that they have to stop sending it abroad. That will only get worse.

Investors aren't making money in China, and the politics just compounds the risks, which are unlikely to change any time soon. As money finds other destinations, expect more continued tightening and inefficiencies as China becomes more ossified.

Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

Christopher Balding was a professor at the Fulbright University Vietnam and the HSBC Business School of Peking University Graduate School. He specializes in the Chinese economy, financial markets, and technology. A senior fellow at the Henry Jackson Society, he lived in China and Vietnam for more than a decade before relocating to the United States.

OPINION

# The Absence of Xi Jinping and the Fall of Qin Gang

By Roger Garside



The absence of Chinese leader Xi Jinping from the G20 summit was unprecedented, unexplained, and more than a little mysterious. So was his failure to read his own speech at a BRICS forum in South Africa, his no-show during China's flood disaster in July and August, and his prolonged absences from public view throughout the summer.

I believe that this series of nonappearances may be linked to another mystery: the dramatic fall from grace in July of Foreign Affairs Minister Qin Gang, who had enjoyed a meteoric rise to stardom that must have been authorized and orchestrated by Mr. Xi.

Within a year of working on the protocol arrangements for Mr. Xi's meetings with foreign leaders, Mr. Qin had been promoted to assistant foreign minister, vice foreign minister, foreign minister, and then state councilor (which ranks above minister). Promotion from vice minister to state councilor normally takes five years; Mr. Qin achieved it in three months. Expert observers and Chinese insiders speculated that Mr. Xi was testing Mr. Qin's potential for further high office.

In 2010, Mr. Qin served a stint as second-in-command to the ambassador of the Chinese Embassy in the UK. After only 15 months in London, he was brought back to Beijing to become director-general of the Information Department, leading the ministry's relations with the foreign media. He was later made director-general of the Protocol Department, a role no less important in the Chinese setting. This position brought him into direct contact with Mr. Xi, who was clearly impressed.

During his posting in London, the handsome, debonair Mr. Qin would certainly have met Fu Xiaotian, bureau chief of the Hong Kong-based network Phoenix Television. Ms. Fu was at the start of a brilliant television career. From London, she soon moved to Hong Kong to host its prestigious series "Talk With World Leaders," interviewing luminaries, such as U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Ms. Fu hadn't been born into China's political elite but had been awarded degrees by China's two top universities and the University of Cambridge. That privileged education and her subsequent rapid rise at Phoenix showed that she had won the backing of very powerful people.

However, in 2021, the people who had promoted her at Phoenix were ejected by Mr. Xi. Liu Changle, who had controlled Phoenix since founding it in 1996, was forced out of the company, together with all his senior managers. This wasn't a corporate reshuffle; it was a power move by Mr. Xi against his most deadly opponents in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the "Shanghai faction." Mr. Liu was prominent in that faction, and Phoenix was a weapon that Mr. Xi wanted under his control.

At this moment, when her career was in jeopardy, Ms. Fu reached out to Mr. Qin. On March 21, 2022, she flew by private jet from California, where she was now living, to Washington to record an interview with him for "Talk with World Leaders." At one point in the show, this glamorous couple was shown standing side by side, surveying the rooftop scene in Washington. Chinese netizens who viewed it commented that the chemistry and physical ease between them was unmistakable.

Eight months later, on Nov. 24, 2022,



(L-R) Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Chinese leader Xi Jinping, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attend the 2023 BRICS Summit at the Sandton Convention Center in Johannesburg on Aug. 24, 2023.

The apparently invincible Mr. Xi suffers from a fundamental weakness: He's defending a totalitarian political system that has produced an array of deep and long-lasting problems that it can't resolve.

China's then-Foreign Minister Qin Gang attends a press conference at the Media Center in Beijing on March 7, 2023.



Ms. Fu gave birth to a boy. She named him Er-Kin, which some netizens pointed out could be a play on the Chinese for "Son of Qin."

Four months later, when Mr. Qin, now foreign minister, was accompanying Mr. Xi to Moscow, Ms. Fu made two new postings on Chinese social media that fueled much more speculation (never confirmed) that she was claiming Mr. Qin to be the father of her son.

Three weeks later, on April 10, Ms. Fu posted on Twitter a photo of herself with Er-Kin on the same private jet that had carried her to Washington to interview Mr. Qin a year earlier. She wrote that it was taking her back to the "front line," presumably China. She hasn't been seen in public since. If Ms. Fu's career strategy had been based on a partnership with Mr. Qin, it was in deep trouble, as a new development would soon confirm.

On June 25, Mr. Qin held talks with counterparts from Russia, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka, but then he, too, disappeared from public view. On July 11, the Foreign Ministry attributed this to "health reasons." Still, netizens flooded social media with assertions that he was in a relationship with Ms. Fu and speculation on this and other possible reasons for his disappearance.

The internet censors would normally block gossip about an official of Mr. Qin's seniority. Their failure to do so is evidence, I believe, that they were taking their orders not from Mr. Qin's mentor, Mr. Xi, but from Mr. Xi's opponents. Most worrying for Mr. Xi was a call by Wang Guangya, former vice minister of foreign affairs, for Mr. Qin to be officially investigated for misconduct involving Ms. Fu.

Mr. Wang isn't just any former vice minister. His wife is the daughter of Marshal Chen Yi, one of the most illustrious of the founding fathers of communist China. Mr. Wang's diplomatic postings had included that of China's representative at the United Nations.

His wife's family may have had strong reasons to inflict damage on Mr. Xi. Soon after Mr. Xi came to power, made clear his determination to block political reform, and centralized power in his own hands, Mr. Wang's brother-in-law, Chen Xiaolu, warned against a reversion to the political methods used by Mao Zedong in the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, he was following in the footsteps of his father, who had courageously opposed the Cultural Revolution and suffered for it.

Mr. Chen had been an early director of Anbang Insurance Group, the insurance company founded and run by a grandson-in-law of Deng Xiaoping, which amassed assets worth \$300 billion before being liquidated, a decision that Mr. Xi must have approved. When Anbang Insurance Group came under attack, Mr. Chen was detained briefly, then released but kept under surveillance. A few months later, he died, supposedly of a heart attack, just three months before the founder of Anbang Insurance Group was sentenced to 18 years in prison.

Mr. Wang's call for Mr. Qin to be investigated suggests that Mr. Qin was caught in a crossfire between families and factions who were infinitely richer and more

powerful than him.

So thorough is the surveillance and reporting of senior officials by China's security services that Mr. Xi must have known the details of Mr. Qin's private life, including the social media postings linking Mr. Qin and Ms. Fu and her links to the Shanghai faction, before promoting him so far and so fast. He must have calculated that he could protect his protégé from attack. True, Mr. Qin was married, but no Chinese minister had ever been dismissed for an extramarital relationship. True also, Ms. Fu had spent her whole career in an organization controlled by the Shanghai faction, but Mr. Xi had destroyed the corporate power of those responsible for her rise to stardom.

If such were Mr. Xi's calculations, his adversaries would have proved him wrong. For the first time since assuming leadership of the Party in 2012, he has proved incapable of defending one of his protégés, and not just any protégé, but the one whom he had marked out for promotion to the highest level. Most foreign observers who are accustomed to regarding him as all-powerful are still puzzling over the reasons for Mr. Qin's removal. Still, I believe that in the senior ranks of the CCP, Mr. Qin's removal has diminished Mr. Xi's authority. For now, Mr. Qin retains the title of state councilor but has been stripped of all power and is absent from public view. As things stand, he's a nonperson.

Viewed as an isolated phenomenon, Mr. Qin's removal is bad enough for Mr. Xi. But viewed in the context in which Mr. Xi has been absent from public view without good cause and then appears in odd places, such as China's far west or northeast, without good cause, is worse. And we haven't even touched on the turmoil in China's military high command.

The total victory that most commentators declared Mr. Xi to have won at the CCP's 20th National Congress in November 2022 wasn't all that it seemed. He was able to pack the top leadership with his chosen followers, but in reality, it was only a phase in a continuing and deadly power struggle.

The apparently invincible Mr. Xi suffers from a fundamental weakness: He's defending a totalitarian political system that has produced an array of deep and long-lasting problems that it can't resolve. He didn't create those problems, but for a decade, he ignored and intensified them, and he's now frozen in impotence as they manifest themselves before the eyes of his people and the world. His enemies at home and abroad are watching with keen interest, and behind the scenes, they're maneuvering against him. The removal of Mr. Qin is just the first fruit they've picked.

Views expressed in this article are opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

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