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Note from Head of CS3

Dear All,

We are happy to publish the twelfth issue of the Sinometer: The China Strategic Monitor, a monthly newsletter by the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3), USI.

The newsletter is divided into two sections. The newsletter begins with an analysis of ex-President Jiang Zemin's death and its possible effect on the Xi Jinping administration. It is then followed by news, one of the significant incidents being the clash between Indian and Chinese forces along the Tawang region. Other headlines include China's easing of covid restrictions, Chinese military installations in the SCS and Chinese 'police stations' in Italy.

This issue aims to give a holistic perspective of China in the backdrop of China's growing covid cases and Jiang Zemin's death. We hope that budding China Watchers will take an interest in the newsletter. Happy reading!

**Maj Gen RPS Bhadauria,
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Analysis

The death of Jiang Zemin puts Xi at risk during a challenging time

(An abridged version of the Bloomberg article titled 'Jiang Death Injects Risk for Xi at Fraught Time in China' by Colum Murphy and Rebecca Choong Wilkins)

The passing of longtime Chinese leader Jiang Zemin presents Xi Jinping with another hurdle. It might serve as a rallying point for those who are fed up with the strict Covid Zero regulations and a sputtering economy. Jiang's passing at the age of 96 was reported by state media on Wednesday, just days after protesters in China's largest-ever demonstrations in decades went to the streets to oppose viral bans. Even while the protests have since receded, plans to honour the late leader who led the Asian country's opening to the outside world might provide rallies with a new push for criticism of Xi.

"After the death of such a big figure in Chinese politics, some people may write articles, people may have gatherings, and this would be legal and allowed," said Chen Gang, an assistant director and senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute. "If such activities continue, people can contrast with the previous leader and the current situation. That may have a backlash effect upon the current administration".

A similar incident in April 1989, the murder of expelled Communist Party official Hu Yaobang, sparked a public outcry that turned into pro-democracy rallies at Tiananmen Square and loosely connected events around the nation. By June, Deng Xiaoping, the supreme leader of China, had decided to send the military into the plaza to end the movement. In the immediate wake of the crackdown, Deng appointed Jiang as a leader since Beijing's relations with the rest of the world were severed due to the incident. Jiang led China's return to the international scene despite his involvement in the unrest, presiding over a time of tremendous progress and comparative openness.

Those unhappy with Xi's more inward-looking age of slower growth and increased emphasis on security may find solace in nostalgia for that time. Hundreds of protests were held last weekend around China, with some demonstrators publicly asking Xi to resign in a rare show of disobedience against one-party rule.

“The Communist Party is now facing a crisis because there’s so much negative news and morale is low,” said Alfred Wu, associate professor at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. “Jiang Zemin now appears very beloved by many people compared to the current regime.” Jiang was also somewhat well-liked by the general populace, partly because his magnetism worked well even in the digital era, winning him followers among China's younger population in recent years. Internet fans exploited images of the amphibian to commemorate Jiang's presence in so-called ‘toad worship memes’, which frequently fueled nostalgia for the period he presided over.

However, according to Wang Dan, a former student leader of the Tiananmen Democracy Movement and the creator of the think tank Dialogue China, public support for Jiang is still insignificant compared to the sorrow caused by Hu's passing. “Today’s younger generation, I don’t think they love Jiang Zemin because they know nothing about him,” Wang told the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan on Thursday. “It’s not enough to push them to the street”.

China will clamp down on any attempt to repeat last weekend’s protests. The country’s top law enforcement body vowed Monday not to tolerate “illegal and criminal acts that disrupt social order.” Those arriving at rumoured protest sites this week have found large groups of police waiting for them. The party will go into "overdrive," according to Neil Thomas, a China analyst with Eurasia Group, a political risk advising and consultancy business, to manage the public's message of sadness for Jiang and to safeguard the streets during any formal commemorations. He said that Beijing was not unprepared for Jiang's passing.

State broadcaster CCTV has announced that a state memorial for Jiang will take place on Tuesday at 10 a.m. On that day, public entertainment events will be suspended, and Chinese citizens around the nation will be asked to observe a three-minute silence. According to China National Radio, Jiang's remains arrived in Beijing on Thursday from Shanghai, where Xi and other influential figures welcomed them at the airport. There will not be a public memorial service for Jiang.

Tens of thousands of Chinese citizens came along Chang'an Avenue in the nation's capital when Deng was cremated in 1997 to say goodbye and display banners and images. On Thursday, several Chinese social media users sent condolences to Jiang, many of which had a nostalgic undertone. Residents were seen paying tribute to Jiang in online images in his old home in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, at the food plant where he worked in Shanghai, and on the campus of his alma school, Shanghai Jiaotong University. Nearly 300,000 people liked a Weibo post with footage showing flowers being laid in front of Jiang's former home in Yangzhou.

Richard McGregor, senior fellow for East Asia at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, said China's law-enforcement agencies would help avoid repeating past events. "In many respects, the security apparatus we have in China today is a product of the disastrous way that 1989 was handled," he said. "Still, that doesn't mean it won't be a huge cost if the protests continue or if Jiang Zemin's death accentuates them".¹

¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-01/jiang-death-injects-uncertainty-for-xi-at-fraught-time-in-china?leadSource=verify%20wall>

News

China-India clash again at disputed borders on 09 December

The contested Himalayan frontier between China and India saw fighting last week, the Indian army said on Monday, 12 December. The tragic battles in 2020 worsened the already strained ties between the two Asian superpowers, and this was the first documented standoff between forces from the two countries since then.

According to India, the fighting happened on 09 December along the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh. Indian and Chinese troops "quickly disengaged" following the encounter, which resulted in minor injuries to soldiers on both sides. "Chinese and Indian soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand combat. People's Liberation Army (PLA) personnel were prevented from entering our land by Indian troops", Rajnath Singh, the Indian defence minister, spoke to the legislature on 13 December.

In the meantime, China declared that conditions on its border with India were "stable." In general, the China-India border situation is calm, according to Wang Wenbin, a spokeswoman for the foreign ministry, who also noted that the two countries "kept an unhindered communication on the border issue through diplomatic and military channels".²

China eases Covid restrictions; however, cases continue to rise

The population of China was devastated by the relaxation of its Zero-Covid regulation. After three years of stringent limitations, some people have embraced their newfound freedoms, while others find it challenging to overcome their anxieties about contracting the disease. In late November, anger about extended lockdowns and intensive testing erupted into decades' most significant demonstration of public unhappiness. China has announced plans to scrap its primary Covid tracking application as one of the measures in easing zero-covid measures. On expectations that China's strict Zero-Covid regulations will be loosened, the price of various essential commodities and global equities has increased.

² <https://www.dw.com/en/india-china-border-clashes-erupted-on-december-9-says-delhi/a-64071941>

However, cases started rising rapidly after the rollback of measures. After infections skyrocketed, China's National Health Commission (NHC) decided to stop posting daily Covid-19 statistics due to doubts about the accuracy of the data. The Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention will disclose pertinent Covid information for reference and study, according to a statement from the commission. The statement omitted any explanations for the shift or how frequently China CDC will tell the public of new Covid data.³

Expert says protests in China might affect Xi's rule

The protests in China may change how Xi Jinping runs the country, says Minxin Pei, a Chinese-American professor who thinks the protests will impact government policies. Over the last week, the sudden escalation of anti-lockdown rallies in China astounded both its government and the outside world. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has brutally suppressed numerous large rallies in the past, hastened to react when the first demonstrations broke out in Xinjiang and Shanghai.

To stop the protests, Chinese authorities have now taken a variety of measures. The government's 'Zero-Covid' policy—which is still in place—is promised to be more precisely implemented while there is an enhanced police presence and harassment of demonstrators. Whatever the immediate effects of the demonstrations, which now seem to be gone, they are likely to impact policy for the rest of President Xi Jinping's term in office.⁴

Report: Chinese military installations built artificially in the SCS pose a danger to geomorphologic stability

According to a US newspaper, the geomorphologic stability of the area is at risk due to China's militarisation of man-made islands in the South China Sea. The fortification of 20 outposts by China in the Paracel Islands and seven in the Spratly Islands in the disputed South China Sea (SCS) during the past ten years has raised

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/25/china-stops-publishing-daily-covid-figures-amid-reports-of-explosion-in-cases>

⁴ <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/11/30/the-protests-in-china-may-change-the-way-xi-jinping-runs-the-country-says-minxin-pei>

serious concerns, according to The Geneva Daily. It stated that militarisation is a threat to all those who support the value of freedom of navigation, not just the nations in the region. The geomorphologic stability of these man-made islands is a significant drawback.

Closer examinations show that these military outposts may not be as strong as they appear. The Daily further stated that due to the water's extreme corrosivity and the climate in the SCS, the service life of concrete constructions in the South China Sea is predicted to be fewer than 25 years. While the lack of freshwater resources, particularly drinkable water, is undoubtedly a hindrance, studies have also shown that the islands seriously threaten their long-term residents' physical and mental health.⁵

Italy hub of maximum Chinese 'police stations'

Out of a network of more than 100 worldwide, Italy is home to the most unauthorised Chinese "police stations," according to research by a Spanish human rights organisation. In September, the Safeguard Defenders organisation, located in Madrid, claimed that there were 54 similar stations throughout the globe. This information sparked police inquiries in at least 12 nations, including Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands. The human rights organisation said in a report that it had located 48 new stations, 11 of which are in Italy. It also mentioned other recently discovered stations in Croatia, Serbia, and Romania.⁶

⁵ <https://newsonair.com/2022/12/03/artificially-created-chinese-military-outposts-in-south-china-sea-threaten-geomorphologic-stability-report/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/05/italy-home-11-unofficial-chinese-police-stations-world>

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