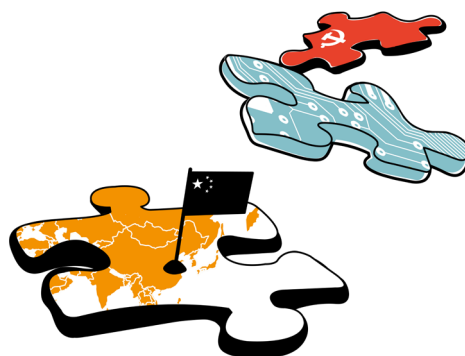


MAY 20, 2021

# MERICS China Briefing



## CONTENTS

TOP STORY.....	2
Red Planet: Mars landing marks major milestone for China’s space program .....	2
TOPICS.....	4
China offers to mediate in Israel-Palestine conflict.....	4
Growing pressure on China over Xinjiang .....	4
New “Wealth Management Connect” to deepen economic integration of the Greater Bay Area.....	5
METRIX .....	6
REVIEW .....	6
The War on the Uyghurs. China’s Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority, by Sean R. Roberts.....	6
MERICS CHINA DIGEST .....	7



**MERICS**

Mercator Institute for China Studies

## TOP STORY

### Red Planet: Mars landing marks major milestone for China's space program

When China landed its rover on Mars last week, it took another great step toward achieving its ambition of becoming “a space power in all respects”. Beijing is determined to harness the scientific, economic, military and diplomatic advantages of its space exploration program, which is also a source of national pride and a major element in the power contest with the United States.

The Zhurong rover (祝融号) is part of Beijing's first interplanetary unmanned mission to Mars, Tianwen-1 (天问一号). The plan is for the rover to explore Mars' surface studying the planet's topography, soil structure, magnetic fields and climate, and searching for potential underground reserves of water ice that could support future human colonization.

It is a historic achievement for the China National Space Administration space program and comes conveniently in the year the Communist Party celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The front page of the People's Daily ran a message from president Xi Jinping, with the title printed in red, praising China's leap into the “world's advanced ranks in the field of planetary exploration,” and stressing the mission's significance not just for mankind, but for the country's “self-reliance in science and technology”.

China still lags behind the United States but has thrown substantial resources into its space program. Last year, it became the first nation to land on the far side of the moon. Having been excluded from the International Space Station mainly due to US concerns about technology theft, on April 29 China launched the core module of its own space station, which it pledged to open for all United Nations members. Russia and China have also signed an agreement to set up a joint research station on the moon.

**MERICS analysis:** “Deep space is among the cutting-edge science and technology fields listed as research priorities in the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan. China's progress on interplanetary expedition has been remarkable. Landing on Mars is a much greater technical challenge than landing on the moon. The fact that China could be about to accomplish in one mission what NASA took decades to achieve – reaching orbit, landing on the surface and then getting a rover moving – would be a symbolic victory for an increasingly nationalistic government with bold plans for technological leadership. The significance of this mission in the context of Beijing's march towards global power status cannot be overstated.” MERICS analyst, **Rebecca Arcesati**

#### Media coverage and sources:

- Ministry of National Defense of the PRC [CN]: [Xi Jinping's congratulatory message](#)
- New York Times: [China releases first photos after Rover's Mars landing](#)
- Financial Times: [China lands rover on Mars for the first time](#)
- The New York Times: [China's Mars Rover Mission Lands on the Red Planet](#)
- Nature: [Why geologists are excited about China's Mars rover landing](#)

- Global Times: [More Tianwen-series probes to collect samples from Mars for re-search: chief designer](#)
- State Council Information Office: [White paper on China's space activities in 2016](#)
- CSIS: [China's new space station is a stepping-stone to achieving broader ambitions](#)

## Mars landing is only the latest milestone in China's ambitious space program

A fast journey to one of the worlds' leading space powers



Past milestones	
September 12, 1992	China launches its manned space program, known as Project 921
November 20, 1999	A Long March-2F rocket launches China's first unmanned spaceship, Shenzhou-1
October 15, 2003	Yang Liwei is the first Chinese astronaut (or taikonaut) in space, making China the third nation to achieve this milestone after the United States and Russia
2011 – 2018	Tiangong-1, China's first prototype space station, orbits Earth carrying out orbit experiments, rendezvous and docking
December 14, 2013	The Chang'e-3 mission lands the first Chinese rover on the moon
September 15, 2016	China launches a second, better equipped space laboratory, Tiangong-2
January 3, 2019	With the Chang'e-4 mission, China becomes the first nation to land a rover on the far side of the moon
April 29, 2021	The Tianhe-1 core module of the Chinese Space Station (CSS) is launched aboard a Long March-5B Y2 carrier rocket
May 15, 2021	The Tianwen-1 lander and rover land on the surface of Mars
Future goals	
2022	Six more station-building missions are to be launched, carrying the experiment modules Wentian and Mengtian and completing the CSS
By 2030	China plans to probe asteroids, send more sampling probes to Mars, and launch an exploration mission to the Jupiter system
By 2030	The 100-ton super-heavy lift carrier rocket, the Long March-9, is to be launched, making it possible for China to carry out its first manned lunar landing mission and support the Mars probe's return journey
Between 2030 and 2035	China plans to build an International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) in the lunar south pole region, jointly with Russia
By 2040	A nuclear-powered space shuttle is to be built, enabling large-scale resource exploration in space, asteroid mining, and the construction of a space-based solar-power station
By 2045	China aim is to be a world-leading space power that can carry out large-scale exploration on planets, asteroids and comets in the solar system, and send taikonauts to Mars

\* Source: Xinhua, China Daily, SpaceNews

## TOPICS

### China offers to mediate in Israel-Palestine conflict

**The facts:** As the number of casualties in the Israel-Palestine conflict kept climbing, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for an immediate ceasefire and asked the UN Security Council (which China currently chairs) to help de-escalate the situation. He expressed support for a two-state solution and offered to mediate between Israel and Palestine, inviting both sides to come to China to “engage in direct talks” as part of a four-point proposal. Beijing used this opportunity to contrast its efforts to those of the US, who it blames for “obstructing” the UNSC in taking action in order to protect its ally, Israel.

**What to watch:** China has been offering to mediate and putting forward proposals to settle the Israel-Palestine conflict for years. The first Special Envoy to the region was appointed in 2002, and the first Five-Point Proposal on the issue was put forward in 2003. However, China’s offers have yielded no results so far. Beijing has long focused on high-profile activities and rhetoric, without taking on a more active role. It remains to be seen whether China will put forward any more concrete and actionable proposals for de-escalation and the start of peace talks between the two sides. This, however, seems unlikely.

**MERICS analysis:** Beijing is using this crisis to burnish its responsible global power credentials, by offering an (admittedly vague) alternative path to a settlement of the dispute, in contrast to the US’s longstanding support for Israel. China is also hoping to play up its image in the region as a relatively honest broker, since it does not carry the same historical baggage as the US or European countries. Beijing, however, is neither willing nor able to take on the United States’ responsibilities at this stage, as it would involve getting involved in a complex and politically charged dispute, with which it has little to no experience.

**More on the topic:** [“China as a conflict mediator”](#), short analysis and graphic by **Helena Legarda**

#### Media coverage and sources:

- South China Morning Post: [China offers to host Israeli-Palestinian peace talks](#)
- Xinhua: [Wang Yi’s 4-point proposal](#)
- Global Times: [China puts forward a four-point proposal regarding escalating Palestine-Israel conflict](#)
- New York Times: [After years of quiet, Israeli-Palestinian conflict exploded. Why now?](#)

### Growing pressure on China over Xinjiang

**The facts:** Germany’s parliament on Monday came a step closer to taking a position on China’s treatment of its Uyghur minority when the Bundestag’s human-rights committee held a public hearing about Xinjiang. While the invited experts largely agreed there was

not enough evidence to classify China's actions as genocide, MERICS China Briefing learned some committee members were pushing for a plenary vote to condemn the situation in the province. But with a recess that stretches beyond September's national elections starting in a month, it was unclear whether they could secure enough support and parliamentary time.

According to a legal opinion from the Bundestag's research service, German companies could face legal liability claims should they do business with companies in Xinjiang that use forced labor. A number of recent reports have detailed the widespread use of forced labour in the region. The human-rights situation there was also a topic on the fringes of the United Nations. About 50 countries attended a virtual event about the Uyghurs' plight organized by the German, US and UK delegations. China had lobbied other UN members to stay away.

**What to watch:** The Chinese government regularly objects to any public discussion about human-rights violations in Xinjiang. The Chinese Ambassador to Germany condemned the Bundestag committee's hearing on possible genocide or crimes against humanity as "malicious denigration and political manipulation." Beijing will likely increase pressure on any governments, organizations and companies that challenge its narrative. China wants discourse sovereignty and will tolerate no challenges to its reading of events.

**MERICS analysis:** China's continued flat-out denial of systemic human-rights violations at the international level and the domestic taboo it has placed on discussing the issue, mark a turning point. By allowing no scope for debate, Beijing's policies in the region will continue to be a source of conflict in international relations.

**Media coverage and sources:**

- Deutscher Bundestag: [Die Uiguren in China im Lichte der Völkermordkonvention](#)
- CSIS: [A Dark Spot for the Solar Energy Industry: Forced Labor in Xinjiang](#)
- Reuters: [US, UK, Germany clash with China at UN over Xinjiang](#)
- AP News: [Drop in Xinjiang birthrate largest in recent history: report](#)

## **New "Wealth Management Connect" to deepen economic integration of the Greater Bay Area**

**The facts:** Financial regulators, including the Shenzhen sub-branch of the People's Bank of China, have published a draft for the Wealth Management Connect program (WMC). The WMC is a pilot scheme that opens investments in wealth management products across the Greater Bay Area, including Hong Kong and Macao and six cities in Guangdong province.

Wealth management products are uninsured financial products sold by banks in Hong Kong, Macao and on the mainland. The review period for the WMC pilot scheme draft published on May 6 ends on May 21. For the residents of the Greater Bay Area, the launch of the WMC promises more investment options in both Hong Kong and Macao. As the WMC will launch in a trial phase, the investment quotas are set at CNY 150 billion (USD 23

billion) in each direction. An individual's investment through the program will be capped at CNY 1 million.

**What to watch:** The WMC will be the third cross-border investment program involving Hong Kong and mainland China after the stock and bond connect programs established in 2014 and 2017, respectively. Previous financial connects between the mainland and Hong Kong have first allowed inflow, only later outflow. In case of the WMC, Beijing has promised both from the start. The Greater Bay Area is a testing ground for opening measures for the financial sector. Discussions about an insurance connect scheme are also ongoing.

**MERICS analysis:** The launch of the pilot scheme would be another step towards integrating China with the international financial hub in Hong Kong and Macao. Once implemented it will lead to an increase in capital flows, a greater variety of wealth management products and more cross-border connectivity. The WMC confirms the appetite of Chinese regulators for more, although cautious, capital-account opening.

**Media coverage and sources:**

- Bloomberg: [China Signals Wealth Connect with Hong Kong Nears Kickoff](#)
- Caixin: [Four Things to Know About Greater Bay Area's Cross-Border Wealth Management Plans](#)
- International Investment: [HK sets USD 23bn cap under new cross-border WMC](#)
- China Banking News: [Wealth Management Connect on Track for Launch](#)

## METRIX

# 15%

About fifteen percent of China's population – more than 218 million people - have a college degree, according to the latest Chinese census data. Based on the OECD average of 39 percent in 2019, China is still behind most developed countries. But it is still a laudable achievement considering the country had fewer than 3.5 million graduates and undergraduates 2 decades ago. The challenge for China now is to find jobs for its college graduates as the economy is still mostly driven by blue-collar labor. (Source: [New York Times](#))

## REVIEW

### **The War on the Uyghurs. China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority, by Sean R. Roberts**

China's treatment of ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang has strained international relations. The United States, Canada, the EU and the United Kingdom have collectively sanctioned Beijing for human rights abuses and lawmakers in some countries have declared China's actions as genocide. Human rights organizations estimate that a million Uyghurs

and predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities have been arbitrarily detained and put in mass internment camps in China. Millions more are said to be subjected to constant surveillance.

Against this backdrop, Sean R. Roberts' book is important and timely. Through in-depth interviews with former detainees, and through critical analysis of Uyghur language sources and events labelled as extremism by the Chinese government, Roberts provides a compelling account of how China has weaponized the narrative of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) to justify its Xinjiang policies.

A global military campaign started by the United States post 9/11, the GWOT was intended to target armed Muslim fundamentalists and extremist groups. But vague definitions of "terrorism" and "terrorist" have allowed China room for its own interpretation, according to which Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang are labeled a security threat to society and the measures taken against them are critical counter-terrorism operations.

Roberts, an anthropologist who has been studying Uyghurs for over 30 years, argues - with evidence - that the claimed terrorist threat in Xinjiang does not exist - that it is a guise used by Beijing to justify its measures. He details chronologically all the periods of tension between Uyghurs and the ruling regime from the Qing dynasty to the current date. In so doing, the book provides clarity and context on one of the biggest human rights issues challenging global governance today.

Reviewed by **Valarie Tan**, MERICS analyst

## MERICS CHINA DIGEST

### MERICS' Top 3:

- [The New York Times: Censorship, Surveillance and Profits: A Hard Bargain for Apple in China](#)
- [South China Morning Post: China deletes 2 million online posts for 'historical nihilism' as Communist Party centenary nears](#)
- [South China Morning Post: China economy suffering new problems as retail sales, industrial output slowed in April](#)

### International relations:

- [Reuters: China bars foreign curricula, ownership in some private schools](#)
- [VRT NWS: Cyberaanval "van nooit geziene grootte" in ons land: "Nog niet opgelost, al lijkt aanval af te zwakken"](#) ("huge cyberattack on the Belgian government & parliament, right surrounding a 2-hr meeting on Xinjiang")
- [The Guardian: "Catastrophic": Sierra Leone sells rainforest for Chinese harbour](#)
- [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China: Wang Yi Hosts "China+Central Asia" Foreign Ministers' Meeting](#)
- [ABC News: Beijing suspends China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue](#)
- [Politico: US Senate advances a rare bipartisan deal on countering China](#)
- [FP: China Is Building Entire Villages in Another Country's Territory](#)

- Global Times: [US top universities recognize Sinopharm vaccine, facilitate return of Chinese students](#)

**Politics, society and media:**

- FP: [School Death Stirs Rare Scandal in China](#)
- South China Morning Post: [International Day Against Homophobia: China still lacks protections and support for LGBT people at work and in society](#)
- RTHK: [Hongkongers rush to 'Save RTHK' from show purge](#)

**Economy, finance and technology:**

- South China Morning Post: [Beijing names and shames Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu and 81 other apps for excessive data collection under new rules](#)
- Protocol: [China's streaming platforms are a new headache for Beijing](#)
- Reuters: [Three Chinese telecom companies to be delisted by NYSE](#)
- South China Morning Post: ['China's caution' reflected in shedding of some US Treasury holdings as stimulus measures raise inflation risk](#)



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