Cover of Covell Meyskens' *Mao's Third Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

From Mao's Third Front to Xi's Belt and Road Initiative

A Conversation with Covell Meyskens

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In the early 1960s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began investing large sums of capital in the interior of the country with the stated goal of building up military and civilian infrastructure to safeguard China from a potential American or Soviet military threat. Often neglected in histories of contemporary China, this so-called Third Front campaign presents some uncanny similarities with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of today, both in its emphasis on infrastructure and in the way in which this mobilisation ensconced industrial society in China's hinterland. In this conversation, we discuss what the Third Front can tell us in terms of 'archaeologies of the BRI' with Covell Meyskens, Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and author of the pioneering study *Mao's Third Front: Militarization of Cold War China* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Going to build Shuicheng Steel
in 1966. PC: maosthirdfront.com.

Matthew Galway: Can you please tell us what was Mao's 'Third Front'? What inspired your interest in this campaign?

Covell Meyskens: The short story is that in the early 1960s, China's leaders believed there was a possibility that either the United States or the Soviet Union might invade or attack China in some capacity. In response, the CCP leadership decided to move a significant portion of industry inland to central China. They not only moved industry there, but also shifted investment in infrastructure to prioritise those areas. This pattern lasted from 1964 to 1980—a period during which nearly 40 per cent of all investment in capital construction occurred in the provinces of central China.

As for the second part of your question, I knew that I wanted to study the Cold War period in China, so I looked through John Fairbank's book *China: A New History* in an attempt to find topics that were relevant to the Cold War. There was a page in the book right before Fairbank discusses the Cultural Revolution where he mentions the Third Front. I had never read about this campaign in scholarship, so this spurred my interest. The Third Front lined up with the Cold War, and it had a political economy aspect that also piqued my interest. Later on, I thought numerous times as I was

Housing at Shuicheng Steel in the late 1960s.
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writing the book that I was a tad too ambitious in focusing on such a big topic as it was a very arduous process of refining my focus into a more manageable product.

MG: Labour is a paramount issue in discussions of the Third Front. What methods did the CCP use to recruit, mobilise, and, on occasion, force workers to move into China's hinterland and the Third Front?

CM: That's a complicated issue. Mao had to recruit other members of the CCP leadership on to the project because they were initially hesitant about the Third Front. After the Great Leap Forward [GLF] of 1958–60, Mao was dissatisfied with Liu Shaoqi's reforms, which he thought would lead to revisionist tendencies, such as more emphasis on expertise and high-level administrators, and an acceptance of social stratification and inequalities. He associated these negative features with the Soviet Union and considered them illegitimate, incorrect forms of socialism that the CCP should work to avoid. Thus, Mao pushed back against these policies. At the same time in 1964 that Mao accused CCP leaders of losing touch with their revolutionary ways and becoming revisionist like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he also discussed how socialist China's security was in peril because of rising tensions with the Soviet

Union and the United States increasing its military engagement in Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam. Initially, Mao pushed for only a few Third Front projects, but over time, his vision expanded and developed into a matter of leaders supporting the Third Front or being a revisionist.

My interpretation is that Mao was seeking to regain control of the policymaking apparatus and the direction of reforms, and what resulted was a second GLF, in a sense. It was similar to the GLF in terms of what its architects sought to achieve: a massive burst of economic activity that heavily relied on the mass mobilisation of militarised labour to quickly build up industrial infrastructure. However, this 'second' GLF differed in three important ways. One, it was a top-secret campaign. Two, it was run by the central government, and local officials could not start Third Front projects on their own. And three, Deng Xiaoping, Liu Shaoqi, among others, insisted that the Third Front must not squeeze the rural areas too much for the sake of rapid industrialisation. Instead, the Party had to ensure that people had enough food to eat. Leaders stressed this point because they still had the hardships of the GLF fresh on their minds. So initially, Mao moved to recruit the CCP leadership. Even after the campaign had begun, Liu Shaoqi continued to voice concerns that the Party might be heading towards another GLF, of overheating the economy and attempting to build too much too quickly. However, that did not change the fact that, under Mao's pressure, the Party had, with the launch of the Third Front, ended the moratorium on massive-scale infrastructure projects that had been in effect since the end of the Great Leap. The Third Front reasserted, once again, the Maoist way of development that occurred during the GLF.

If we go beyond central Party leaders and look at provincial and city governments, unsurprisingly, those from big industrial cities on the coast were less inclined to send their industrial apparatus inland, while provincial leaders in inland areas were more interested in the Third Front. Often, the big projects undertaken were recycled from the GLF, and some were even recycled from Sun Yat-sen's plans or the Guomindang's plans from the Republican period. Lower down at the level of factories, the CCP Central Committee sent central government documents down to the provincial and municipal levels, and then those filtered down to specific companies through the ministries that were in control of the companies. Thereafter, meetings often followed. If there were many people who moved to work on the Third Front, there was a large meeting in which leading Party representatives explained to people what the Third Front was. CCP convenors used set phrases, as with most campaigns in Mao's China, to describe what the Third Front was.

In the course of my research, I found a few propaganda documents in which they explain what was said at a mobilisation meeting. The most famous saying was: 'If we do not build the Third Front, then Chairman Mao will not sleep well.' Thus, it was partly about the

ardency of ‘we have to do this for the leader, and we have to do it for him to be at ease, for him to feel like the country is safe’. This was the nationalist, leader-centred aspect of motivations to work on the Third Front. Mobilisation meetings also highlighted the threat of the Soviet Union, the threat of the United States in Southeast Asia, and the greater American arc of bases that extended from South Korea all the way down into Southeast Asia through Japan and Taiwan. Another related discussion was about the internal threat, of the people who were not cooperating with the Third Front program and were promoting revisionist tendencies. These different ideas were all brought into Third Front mobilisation discourse, thereby weaving together into a shared discursive framework the multiple threats posed to China’s socialist project by both internal and external enemies.

For Party members, there was the much more coercive motivating aspect. If you were a Party member and you did not go to the Third Front, you risked losing your membership or your job. Other Third Front recruits also risked losing their jobs. Because the Party-State provided a wide range of material benefits to industrial workers through their workplace, losing those benefits was a really hard constraint that was tantamount to a significant socioeconomic step down in the hierarchy of workplaces in socialist China.

MG: What were the motivations for these workers to go to the Third Front?

CM: At the elite level, the CCP had the ideal that building a socialist economy was to be a nationwide process that occurred throughout its territory. It was not a process focused solely on a single region. The Third Front was one of the biggest manifestations of this ideological tendency in the Mao era. At the elite level and lower, there was also the objective of ‘wanting a modern China’. What did a modern China mean? One big pillar was endowing China with a large industrial base, which was linked to another key component of the dream of making China modern—that is, ensuring that socialist China could industrially protect itself from outside threats. The Third Front was intimately linked to both these objectives. The Third Front was also a better job placement than other possibilities given that it gave someone a job in a state-owned enterprise, which had much better access to the welfare state. Depending on where one went, one might even maintain their original urban *hukou* [户口]. Those were some of the more practical reasons why workers went to the Third Front. Still, others were motivated by careerism. They attended school to learn how to build dams, and they wanted to use their knowledge and skills to actually build dams and contribute electricity to China’s industrialisation. Others were socialist workaholics and wanted to devote all their energy to building a socialist China. This tendency was especially prominent among young people

Building an airplane factory in Hunan in 1969.
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who grew up ‘under the Red Flag’, as the saying goes, and long-time CCP members whose social lives had already long been intertwined with the Party’s mission of building socialism in China.

MG: What does the fact that the CCP kept such a massive campaign secret well into the late 1970s tell us about its capacity for social control?

CM: Vivienne Shue’s concept of the honeycomb state in her 1988 book *The Reach of the State* is useful to understand this phenomenon. She examines how the Maoist society–state relationship worked through the creation of cells. Everything was very cellular, and the connections between the different cells—different work units, institutes, or villages—were tightly controlled. Most of these relationships, in theory, were mediated through some form of the state, whether central or local. The Third Front was an extreme version of this relationship. For instance, a factory was placed by the Party-State in a gorge in the middle of the mountains of Guizhou far away from any major city. These people were not free to go out into the city or gain access to resources from their surroundings, which of course doesn’t mean that they didn’t do so—unsanctioned market exchanges and trips did occur—but they were not supposed to, as connections of this sort between different cells were required to be regulated

Eating a meal at Liupanshui.
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by the state. In these isolated alpine locations, Third Fronters were quite dependent on the state. They had their food, health care, and lodging provided by the state, and there were hard constraints on them obtaining these items from any source besides the state. This was especially the case because most people in the Mao era earned very little cash, and so had tight limits on what they could purchase annually. One also had to obtain passes to move around. Everyone in the Third Front was quite insulated. That was part of the reason why the Third Front remained a secret: because of the cellular composition of the Maoist state, its ability to control basic material resources and the information flows between these ‘cells’.

Another reason why the Third Front remained a secret was because most of it was out in the middle of nowhere, and the cellular character of Maoist society helped the Party to keep it out of public awareness. Some of the Front was in cities. A part of Chengdu, for instance, had Front factories but they were top secret, and people were paid to keep them secret, and their employees had state-mandated cards to enter the work units. This process reinforced the cellular state. In my interviews with people even 30 years after the fact, respondents still thought of me in the language of the Mao era as an ‘American imperialist’ (美帝). This perspective made them especially skittish about talking openly with me. Some of them maintained ties to their factory and it was still conducting classified

work. But even if they were not doing so, they still had a national security mindset that it was their political responsibility to keep national secrets safe from outsiders.

One question that I had early on about the Third Front was: was the campaign a secret or did US intelligence know about it? I conducted research in the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] archives and what became apparent from their files was that US intelligence knew about the big Third Front projects. They saw newly emerging cities, factories, and railways with spy planes and satellites, and they followed the construction of some places over time and estimated what they made based on visible infrastructure. But I have yet to find evidence that proves that US intelligence knew that the CCP was undertaking a large-scale defensive industrialisation campaign called the Third Front. As of yet, I have only had access to low-level surveillance reports about satellites and planes that flew over, took pictures, and charted out what they saw in those flyovers. But it remains unclear to me if they understood that this was a massive project that the CCP designed to prepare the country for guerrilla war.

What the US Government did know about China was that it had a military strategy for handling nuclear war that was quite different than other great powers at the time. After World War II, all great powers came up with different military methods to combat the threat of nuclear war and extensive air bombing. Cold War China never had a significant navy, so it was incapable of defending its coasts if the United States attacked in the way that Japan had done in World War II and the United States had done in Korea in the early 1950s. Cold War China also never had a significant air force, so it was incapable of stopping massive American or Soviet air-raids—a fact brought brutally home to Chinese military leaders in the Korean War, when building underground structures became a major way of avoiding American aerial attacks.

China developed a nuclear weapon in 1964, and then it built out other parts of its nuclear arsenal in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. However, it was incapable of hitting Moscow until 1971 and was unable to hit the eastern coast of the United States until 1981. Simply put, China did not have a nuclear deterrent. It could have attacked US allies in Asia, but that was hardly an effective nuclear deterrent. So, what did the CCP do to deal with the threat of nuclear war? Its nuclear strategy was, essentially, ‘We’re going to let you come into our country and we’re going to militarise everything and have militias everywhere and so we will just bleed you out of our country in a very long guerrilla war’. This was very different from other countries’ approach to nuclear war. This point is worth remembering because it helps to explain some of the militarisation in terms of speech, military training, and widespread distribution of weapons to work units in China, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. These facets of Maoist society are often described in the context

of the domestic battles of factions during the Cultural Revolution, but it is important to remember that the CCP gave this militaristic bent to Maoist society in preparation for protecting socialist China from a potential American or Soviet invasion.

MG: The Third Front was, and I quote from your book here, ‘the sole economic policy that Party leaders formulated at the time to develop inland areas ... [and which] helped to lessen regional economic differences’. In what ways did the Third Front campaign’s industrialisation drive in inland China lay the groundwork for post-Mao Chinese economic growth?

CM: I made this argument as a critique of Barry Naughton, who posited in his seminal articles on the Third Front that there were other ways of having comparable development in inland areas and still carrying out development on the coast. But in all the documentary records that I encountered in my research, these alternatives were never considered by the CCP leadership. There was never a discussion of ‘how about we do a light version of the Third Front and continue to invest in coastal development?’. It was very much this or that. The Third Front represented the only example of large-scale development of the Chinese interior that I have seen Party leaders consider in the 1960s and 1970s.

In terms of how the Front contributed to long-term development, one way was that it installed industrial society in inland areas. It built up the basic building blocks of industrial infrastructure. As scholars have noted, industrial systems have historically functioned through three specific forms of energy—oil, coal, and electricity—all of which have associated industries, such as steel and the railway for coal, the automobile and petrochemicals for oil, and power lines and electronics for electricity. Production of these three energy sources in inland China as well as the major industries associated with them were massively expanded during the Third Front and became a permanent part of the economy of inland areas. The Third Front also helped with levelling economic development between the coastal areas and inland areas, and industrial society became hardwired into the entire country, not just the coast and the Northeast, where it had primarily existed before. In addition, the pursuit of further industrial projects did not just draw on this physical infrastructure, but also on all the people who were involved in these projects and who learned and put to use technical and administrative skills as part of the Third Front’s campaign of building up industrial society in inland China. This bolstering of human capital also had long-term implications for how the CCP considered China’s future development.

MG: What legacy of the Third Front campaign, if any, continued to play a role in the later Western Development Campaign (西部大开发) or with regard to the BRI, which is partly motivated by the need to speed up the development of western China?

CM: There are a couple of different levels here. One is that this industrial base established in inland China became a magnet for further investment later on. Big cities such as Chengdu and Chongqing were built up, and the connections between them were also expanded. But there are also third-tier cities—to speak in the language of the state in China—that were developed. If one visits places like Zigong in Sichuan or Zunyi in Guizhou, much of their original industrial apparatus was an outgrowth of the Third Front. Investments accumulated over time and places thus became magnets for further investment and accumulation of resources. Taken as a whole, the Third Front's entrenchment of industrial society in inland China also significantly contributed to the expansion of the Chinese economy's ever-growing appetite for hydrocarbons and other raw materials—an economic feature that was at the centre of the Western Development Campaign and is now at the core of the BRI.

Another aspect is security. If one examines where portions of China's military industrial complex are today, a substantial portion is in inland areas. Some of it has been left in remote locations, but much of it has been relocated and centralised in big cities like Chengdu, Wuhan, and Xi'an over the past few decades. China's military complex is still spread out in inland regions for strategic reasons because the Party wants part of its industrial defences to be deep in the country rather than on the coast. If one examines where the CCP has recently been building nuclear silos, this pattern repeats itself: they are in inland areas where the Third Front once was. In short, China's military industrial geography still has a significant footprint in inland areas.

Another feature of the Third Front that lives on in more recent CCP policies is the concern for the penetration of frontier regions by foreign forces. For instance, Xinjiang did not host many Third Front factories because the Soviet Union was nearby geographically, and the Party was concerned about Moscow gaining hold of a big piece of China's industrial base. In fact, reversing the trend of the Chinese and Soviet economy becoming more integrated in the 1950s as part of the larger project of creating a socialist world economy, northern China in its entirety was underdeveloped during the 1960s and 1970s for the same geopolitical reason. Even though there are big coal deposits in Inner Mongolia and northern Shaanxi, these areas were not mined extensively by the CCP because of concerns about Soviet forces invading and seizing these territories and their infrastructure. However, Xinjiang, like most other provinces in China, did receive small Third Front complexes in mountainous frontier areas, and they produced arms that a combination of guerrilla and conventional military forces could have used to fight off a foreign

invasion. As I show in my book, this strategy of militarising frontier regions in nearly every single Chinese province was an outgrowth of the CCP's experience of establishing revolutionary base areas in similar areas to fight the Nationalists and the Japanese in the early twentieth century.

Because of the fear of foreign penetration, Xinjiang's economy was also militarised in other ways. Most notably, the Party formed the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, also known as Bingtuan (兵团), out of People's Liberation Army units to head up local economic development. While today's CCP has abandoned the Third Front's strategy of militarising the frontier regions of nearly all provinces, the securitisation of frontier regions, nonetheless, lives on in a different form—Xinjiang being the most well-known example, but also in Inner Mongolia and Tibet. Cases such as these show that there remains a tendency towards militarisation and securitising the local population to protect against penetration by foreign threats.

MG: The Third Front is a rich case in which international politics, specifically Cold War power dynamics, directly shaped the inner workings of the Chinese political economy. Do you think we could also adopt a similar lens for the BRI—that is, President Xi's reassessment of international politics in reshaping China's domestic political economy, and international political economy, writ large?

CM: Yes, this is another legacy of the Third Front, but it is also a legacy of the Cold War. Many forget that the United States never really stopped fighting the Cold War. How did the United States respond to the Cold War in East Asia? It built up economic networks with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and parts of Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Southern Vietnam, Thailand, etc. The United States also developed security partnerships, or at least established connections with many of the aforementioned places and set up military bases there. Those never went away when the Cold War ended; rather, they became part of America's military unconscious and remain in place to this day, still having tens of thousands of troops and a lot of high-powered weaponry. From the 1990s, Chinese leaders have become more concerned about the military and economic structures that the US Government set up during the Cold War to fight communism and which are still in place today. These military-economic containment structures are a driving reason behind why CCP leaders launched the Belt and Road Initiative shortly after the Obama administration's strategic pivot in 2011 away from the War on Terror in the Middle East and Central Asia towards pushing back against China's rising influence in the Indo-Pacific.

But there are a few important differences between the Third Front and the BRI. One is how the Third Front was constructed. It was constructed through domestic resources and the mass mobilisation

of militarised labour. This is very different from the present-day situation in China. With the end of the Mao era, the CCP dramatically changed its views of China's geopolitical situation, giving up the idea that a massive 'hot' war between socialism and capitalist imperialism was on the horizon and instead thinking that the Cold War would remain cold. With this geostrategic shift, Party leaders abandoned the security practice of militarising the economy and society in preparation for a nationwide battle to defend socialist China from a Soviet or American invasion. The Party instead professionalised national defence and made it primarily the People's Liberation Army's responsibility. As part of this demilitarisation of China, the Party also abandoned the developmental practice of mobilising huge regiments of labour to rapidly expand China's industrial base. Taking the place of the masses as the core of the Party's developmental strategy from the 1980s forward was the figure of the technical and administrative expert. In this post-Maoist ideological configuration, as the technical and administrative expert became the subject of the Party's praise, increasing the numbers of such experts became a national need, and countless cultural products came to centre their narratives on how technicians and experts heroically employed their technoscientific acumen for the sake of bettering the nation, their family, and themselves. In the post-Mao era, the masses were still integral to the Party's developmental policies, but their labour was no longer the subject of countless tales of militarised socialist heroism, as it was in the Mao era; rather, it was relegated to where it typically resides in capitalist societies—that is, in the shadows of society, or what Marx called the hidden abode of production.

Over the past few decades, China has also developed into a leading position in the global economy and the BRI is a reflection of China's new geopolitical status, as it extends the country's economic influence all across the world through the purchase of raw materials, expansion of Chinese companies' global market share, and the exporting of Chinese manufactured goods, finance, administrative, and technical expertise. The BRI also exports the CCP's developmental practice of using special economic zones to bring in foreign capital, upgrade local industry, and create an export-based economic growth engine, with the crucial difference that in the case of the BRI it is Chinese companies that are playing the leading role in other countries' development. Now, the Chinese state and Chinese corporations are going to other countries and helping to build their industrial base. But the BRI is also a response to the larger geopolitical framework that Chinese leaders are facing now, especially over the past few years, with increasing pressure from the United States. Party leaders are concerned that China will be shut out of international markets, and their response has been to strive to build Chinese companies into these markets.

The BRI is about building Chinese corporations into the economic fabric of the global economy. The Party envisions this process as beginning with, first, building basic infrastructure, just like with the Third Front. Eventually, BRI countries will also acquire manufacturing bases, which will spur a middle class and, accordingly, create a demand for Chinese goods. In this way, China will be able to gain a higher position on global value chains, while at the same time receiving raw materials and lower-tech goods from BRI nations. Ultimately, the utopian story that the CCP foresees is that all BRI nations will developmentally rise up, obtain a significant middle class and a big consumer society, and they will all live harmoniously—like people in China supposedly have, thanks to the Party's development of the country.

MG: Do you think the CCP today possesses the same level of extraordinary mobilisation capacity?

CM: Well, Chinese society is definitely not cellular anymore, like it was to a significant degree in the Mao era. Chinese society, as Vivienne Shue has argued, is now based on the webs and networks of market exchanges. In Maoist society, people were closed off in their own cells. This cellular character was still noticeable a decade ago in Chinese cities, where walled-off work units dominated the urban landscape. Today, the state is less central to social and economic life, as the Party over the past few decades has gradually marketised more parts of the economy, permitting and at times even encouraging the forging of connections with social and economic actors around the world. In this new stage of China's globalisation, the Party does not manage information and resource flows the same way. It still has the aspiration to channel information and material flows to achieve its political objectives, but this is a much different task today as China's economy and society are no longer cellular and militarised as they were in the Mao era, but are rather demilitarised and interconnected in innumerable ways with regions around the world. The challenge the CCP faces today is how to regulate Chinese society in such a way that both maintains support for the Party and promotes international connections that advance national development, while at the same time ensuring the defence of national interests around the world without provoking too much push back from an apprehensive United States that in the new millennium has found a renewed sense of geopolitical mission in containing Chinese communist expansion worldwide. ■

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