

Q & A

Manoj Kewalramani on Reading the People's Daily, Daily

The scholar reflects on what he's learned from reading the Communist Party's official newspaper every day for two years.

BY ANDREW PEOPLE — MAY 22, 2022

Manoj Kewalramani is an Indian scholar who is currently a China studies fellow at the Takshashila Institution and a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Before turning to academia, he was a full time journalist in both India and China. Since 2020, Kewalramani has produced a daily summary of articles in the People's Daily, the Communist Party's official newspaper, which has become a must-read for China-watchers. His research focuses on Chinese politics, foreign policy and approaches to new technologies, and he is the author of *Smokeless War: China's Quest for Global Primacy*, a book about the CCP's communication efforts during the pandemic. The following is a lightly edited transcript of a recent conversation with The Wire.



Manoj Kewalramani.
Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: Why did the daily review of the *People's Daily* become a focus of your research, and what are you hoping to learn?

A: I started doing this on a regular basis some time in March or April 2020. I used to scan through the *People's Daily* once in a while as part of my work of watching China. But during the pandemic, I went back to it because I wanted to learn about what exactly the Party was saying to itself when it came to the pandemic. Around the time Wuhan was being unlocked, I had this idea that this would be a great opportunity to work on a book project, looking at the Chinese narrative around the pandemic, because something really big was afoot — and to see what the communication was thereby to the world, because increasingly what you say at home is no longer just at home, everything is interconnected. I started gradually putting out a summary on a blog, and that's grown into the newsletter today.

Initially, I thought it was going to be difficult, because the *People's Daily* can be inaccessible. But as I went on, I started to enjoy it, as perverse as that might sound, in the sense that I got into a rhythm. There's a certain amount of order that the newspaper has, and once you get the hang of that order, and that structure, it becomes much easier. I was finding new viewpoints, new areas to investigate. That just grew into a habit to the point that most days, I wake up and the first thing that I do is go and look at what's been covered in the *People's Daily*. And there's a certain amount of excitement, just because there's so much happening in the world. It's really fun to look at what exactly the Communist Party is saying to itself.

What have you learned about the differences between what the Western media regard as important stories about China and the priorities inside the country?

From the outside, we tend to view China predominantly from our perspectives. There's a lot of mirror imaging that takes place, there's a lot of placing China's actions within the context of your own worldview. One of the things that I've learned after reading this paper is that Chinese leaders are predominantly worried about what's happening at home. Their survival is what is critical. And throughout the pandemic, obviously, that was a big deal.

“ There's a tacit acknowledgement of the problems that the people face. It's not necessarily pretending that it's not happening, it's acknowledging that it's happening while projecting a certain degree of control.

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So what is the mindset of the central leadership? What is it that bothers them? What you end up learning is that it's more than just how their policies are impacting the world. It's fundamentally about how their policies are impacting their own survival, their continuation in power, their ability to be able to deliver on some of the commitments or a social contract that they have [with the Chinese people]. It's an interesting time to look at that, because this is a moment where the Party is trying to renegotiate that social contract. What you see on a daily basis is that things like economic policy, employment, commodity prices, social stability, all of those are far more up front and center: Things like, how do you deal with pollution, how you're going to undertake economic reform. And part of that is how do you link this big country and this big market together? How do you continue to grow at a certain rate and continue to deliver on better lifestyles for people? Those are the kind of concerns that you will see far more as the focus.

The Party has survived and thrived fundamentally because it has delivered on a lot of its developmental commitments. You've seen China grow. You can see that it's changed. And therefore the Party understands that some of that delivery has to continue. And there's a real effort going on to figure out how they do that while remaining in power, while not ceding control. Some of that dynamic that's playing out is not necessarily well understood when we look at it from the outside.

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The image from outside of China would be that the *People's Daily* is basically propaganda, but is it a bit more nuanced than that?

I think it covers the issues that are relevant to the Chinese people, but from the perspective of the government, not from the perspective of the people. A great example of that is the current lockdowns in Shanghai. You won't see stories about people struggling with food supplies, or hospital admissions if you have another illness. Where you will see references to this sort of thing in the *People's Daily* is in stories that say something like "policies are being made to make sure that this does not happen." There's a tacit acknowledgement of the problems that the people face. It's not necessarily pretending that it's not happening, it's acknowledging that it's happening while projecting a certain degree of control. The issues that matter to people, their daily needs or crises, usually get covered in this manner in the *People's Daily*. And in that process, you will see that there is some sort of truthfulness, in terms of acknowledging that there are challenges that they face.

In general, how does the *People's Daily* cover bad news for China, such as weaker than expected economic data?

The first quarter economic data for this year is a good example to look at in this context. I don't think that they reported that the data was weaker than expected, or it signaled a greater slowdown or any of that stuff. They basically said, let's look at the long term picture, that the economy is resilient. There are short term challenges, and this is how we are dealing with them. So they don't necessarily dwell on the negative at all.

If there is an objectively bad story in terms of a natural disaster, like the plane crash recently, the coverage of that is usually from the point of view of how the state has responded effectively. Once you're confident that the government response is in place, then you also see emotional stories, which co-opt the victims into this narrative. During COVID, you had volunteers, hospital workers and so on who became heroes, stories about how duty was so important for, say, the doctor who worked for 20 hours at a stretch. So these kinds of things humanize the tragedy, but from the point of view of the fact that the human spirit has triumphed. But the priority or the instinct is to cover the government response first, and then move to the human areas.

Do ordinary people still read the *People's Daily*?

I'm not sure how many ordinary people make the *People's Daily* part of their daily reading routine. More young Chinese people are online. There are many more places where they're going for content.

But even if you don't read it on a regular basis, the system of propaganda of which the *People's Daily* is the fountainhead, is one of command-communication. Within that, the *People's Daily* really enjoys a certain hegemony over policy and media discourse. It sets the tone on very critical policy issues. What you will often see is that if there's a position that's taken in the paper, it very quickly percolates down to different media organizations across the country. It's repeated by Xinhua, which is the State Council's mouthpiece. So even if you're not reading it, you're consuming the message, the message is being filtered down and being repurposed in very different ways.

It also retains its relevance in that it can set the tone on a certain policy. So for example, when it comes to China's gaming sector, an opinion piece in the *People's Daily* which calls the gaming sector the opium of the masses or something like that, immediately sets into motion possible policy action by different government departments.

At the level of the party cadre, it really is critical, because the Communist Party is 95 nearly 100 million people. You have to communicate with them if you want and need them to act in a certain way. Xi Jinping talks a lot about discipline. You do want to control [the cadres'] thought, behavior, actions: So you need this as the leading vehicle, which communicates priorities, attitudes, acceptable behavior, and expectations. And to me, that's much more important in the Chinese system where essentially it's the party which is governing, it's the elites which are deciding, as opposed to popular opinion.

Is it still full of stodgy Communist Party-type speak, or have there been any concessions to modernity?

It's still a difficult read, one has to get into the cadence of the language. And once that happens, you start to realize that there are certain things which are patterns that are mandated. And then you start to figure out what to focus on.

There are three or four reasons why it's a tough read. Firstly, this is the Communist Party's mouthpiece. Despite the era that we're living in, the party is very clear that it's guided by an ideology of Marxism. The worldview is Marxist, therefore, policy discourse and debate tends to take place within the ambit of Marxist discourse. And that's what can make it very inaccessible, because even bread-and-butter issues are framed within this high-minded

ideological context.

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK REC	<i>China's Civilian Army</i> by Peter Martin. Two non-China books that I've really enjoyed reading more than once are <i>The Origin of Satan</i> by Elaine Pagels and <i>Zealot</i> by Reza Aslan.
FAVORITE PERFORMER	Bruce Springsteen
FAVORITE FILM	I don't think I can pick a favourite in Bollywood. I enjoy a lot of very good and very campy, 1980s-90s Bollywood movies. If I was to pick one English movie, it would probably be <i>Constantine</i> . I tend to watch it once every year.
PERSONAL HERO	That's easy; Shahrukh Khan.

Another fact is that, like I said, it's a vehicle to communicate with these 95-100 million cadres primarily, so you need to reinforce certain messages, a lot of the stuff is very repetitive. I like to think of it like a corporate office which is driven by the profit motive, in which messages about goals, processes, bottom lines, codes of conduct are repeatedly reinforced.

The third thing is that some of the language can be ambiguous, which is why sometimes when you read through it, you may end up

realizing that you've read through, say, 5,000 characters, and you still don't understand what exactly was said. Partly that is because when you are setting a broad tone for policy at the 35,000 feet level, a certain degree of ambiguity can permit some degree of exploration at the grassroots level. So if Xi Jinping gives a speech, which says something like "we want to pursue high quality development which improves people's livelihoods," he's setting out a broad goal, he's not defining the parameters of achieving that goal. Because he probably does not himself know how to define those parameters. If the top leader starts to define all policy options and it's listed out very clearly, then it kills room for exploration. This degree of ambiguity also makes it very difficult to apportion blame for screw-ups: The top leaders tend to be protected because of this.

And finally, there's good old secrecy. It's a system which still remains very closed, despite the amount of content that they publish, despite the amount of public engagement that we nowadays see with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other departments regularly giving press conferences. It's a very secretive system in terms of how power functions. So this sort of stodgy language helps with that also.

You said that you can get a sense of what the leadership's priorities are by reading the *People's Daily*. Or is it not quite that simple?

Over the last two years that I've been doing a deep reading of the *People's Daily*, it's been really difficult to figure out that there is a debate on certain issues. One space where, in hindsight, I could figure out that a serious debate had been taking place is around the idea of "common prosperity."

How does one start to figure this out? Firstly, you look at when a slogan enters the paper and the political discourse: How is it then repeated? How often is it repeated? In which context does a term vanish? For example, today there's an article in the *People's Daily* by the secretary of the Trade Unions Federation. And he uses "common prosperity" twice, but he does not go into any details about it. So that tells me immediately that it's been de-prioritised. In fact, over the last six months it has been de-prioritised: Even in Li Keqiang's State NPC work report, he mentioned it only once, obliquely. So you learn that it's being deprioritized.

If you go back to August, September last year, when "common prosperity" became a thing, you would see that once the term came into being, there were pieces which tried to clarify the fact that it does not mean certain things, such as redistribution. Yet they were struggling to define what it actually meant, because there was a lack of clarity in terms of what the top leader meant by it, and what sort of policy implications there would be. If you go back to read the narrative around common prosperity from August to December, before the Central

Economic Work Conference, what you will see is that gradually, there was more explanation that China's not going down the route of a hard redistributive agenda, and that common prosperity is not about welfarism. In fact, they were particularly harsh on the idea of a welfare state, saying that we should not be doing much more than our resources allow us to do, we don't want to cultivate lazy people and things like that.

What have you found to be the main themes of the coverage of Xi Jinping's personality and leadership?

The personality cult was being built very early on, but I think today he's placed, even in the paper, at a different level. Simple things like nobody gets as many pictures of theirs in the paper as Xi Jinping does. Whenever he goes on one of those inspection tours to a province, you usually get a consolidated story, and it takes up nearly the entire front page. Sometimes there are special series which begin with a quote from Xi Jinping which sets the tone, and that quote gets treated differently, graphically, in the paper. Nobody else gets that sort of treatment.

“ Everything, even the most minuscule event, is focused around [Xi Jinping], which is part of the personality cult-building. ”

The rest of the leadership, like the Politburo Standing Committee, tends to get very "protocol"-type treatment, so for example if the weekly State Council meeting has happened, it gets referenced on the front page. Usually, the top of the paper is reserved for something that Xi Jinping may have done, so that he's front and center most of the time, and it's surprising on days when he's not there.

In terms of a cult of personality, a phrase I've read repeatedly is about him being somebody with great foresight: a great Marxist thinker, a leader of truly incredible vision, who's had a strategic viewpoint on domestic and foreign policy issues and all these challenges China faces. He's the ultimate arbiter in terms of decisions. Language like this is used for him, which is obviously not, from what I gather, what was used for Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin. There's the idea that he's a man of action, he's a great thinker, he's a man of the people, he's somebody who's in the foxhole with you when times are hard. The story of him being sent down [to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution] is repeated at every opportunity. There's lots of different coverage about how he's received when he travels to places which again, is not something that you see for others at all. Certain phrases are used for him which are a revival of Maoist era-terms, like the "People's leader." Some of that is where he's obviously on a pedestal, very different from the rest of the leadership.

A trend that I've seen more recently is that even obscure days and events are tailored around Xi Jinping. The most recent example you had of this was World Book Day, with stories about what Xi Jinping reads, and his favorite reads, and his reading list. Everything, even the most minuscule event, is focused around him, which is part of the personality cult-building.

Do you start to notice issues in the *People's Daily* that it takes us in the West sometime to pick up on?

There are things like whether China will adhere to its zero-COVID policy and strict lockdowns. Anybody who was reading the *People's Daily* would have been very clear from very early on that you're not going to see the policy shift. There was lots of [Western] media coverage where we talked about there being a debate in China about living with the virus or continuing with this harsh policy. But if you were consistently reading what the central leadership was saying, it was clearly communicating that it's a political imperative to not change the policy that they've adopted. The fundamental message, that this is the way we are going to do this, was very clear, very early on.

Other things would include the cultural campaign we saw last year, where there was a crackdown on the culture of gaming, and this idea of men not being men, the sissy boys. For some of that, if you were going through what Xi Jinping was saying, and what the *People's Daily* was saying, you had a sense that some of this could come: although how and when those translate into policy is really difficult to predict. So when, for example, the decision on online education happened last year, lots of investment bank analysts went back to reading Xi Jinping's old speeches. Many people then began pointing to those speeches to argue that, "Well, he said this in 2014. So it was expected." But really, he says a lot of things. The question is, how do you know when something like that is happening? It's really difficult, but reading the *People's Daily* gives you a sense at least of what the world view is. When a policy action is going to take place is really, really difficult to figure out.

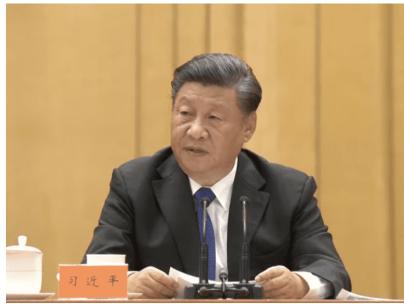
How has the People's Daily been covering the Russia-Ukraine conflict? Have you noticed any changes as the war has progressed?

Initially, across the Chinese policy ecosystem, there was a bit of an adjustment. I don't think they necessarily knew how they would want to respond to this. The Foreign Ministry was struggling to adapt to what was happening. The fact that Chinese citizens weren't evacuated early [from Ukraine] tells you that the system was not necessarily prepared for this sort of an escalation. In those early days, I don't think there was any significant coverage, unless Xi Jinping spoke to Vladimir Putin or something like that, apart from that there wasn't really any coverage.

Some time in March onwards, I think, there's been more clarity, at least in terms of how they're going to respond to this. Since then, the narrative has been fundamentally that this conflict is the U.S.'s fault. It has fundamentally not respected Russian interests, it has stoked conflict in Europe, and it has done so because it wants to retain its position and its hegemony. Throughout April, we've seen a series of ten commentaries [in the *People's Daily*] which have talked about this, and the theme was looking at the conflict through the lens of American hegemony.

The other aspect of that narrative, as sanctions came into place, was that besides this conflict being an American failure, it's also going to have adverse effects on developing countries because of things like commodity prices and because they are going to be forced to choose sides; and also the fact that this conflict is also about Europe and the role of Europe in the world. And that it's an opportunity for Europe to become much more independent of the United States. The narrative is one of telling Europe that this is your moment to stand up and break from the Americans and realize that your interest lies in negotiating a peace deal with the Russians. What's obviously absent from any of this narrative is any sense of responsibility lying with Moscow.

Have you seen any shift in tone on Taiwan recently?



Xi Jinping delivering a speech at the 110th Anniversary of the 1911 Revolution. Credit: [CCTV Video News Agency](#)



Joe Biden meets with Xi Jinping over Zoom, in November 2021. Credit: The White House/[Wikimedia Commons](#)

Ever since November last year, when Biden and Xi Jinping had their first bilateral summit, the Chinese have made it very clear that Taiwan is at the heart of their conversation with the United States. That's their bottom line, it's non-negotiable, and American policy on Taiwan needs to change. Right now, if you were to read through the *People's Daily*, and go through the readouts that we get from the meetings that have happened between American and Chinese leaders, you see that from Xi Jinping downward, all of them are basically talking about how Taiwan is central to this conversation with the United States. And that if the United States is serious about working with China, it needs to shift not just its China policy as a whole, but to begin with the core issue that is Taiwan. So in that sense, yes, Taiwan has been a focus of conversations in the paper.

How does the *People's Daily* report on the internment camps in Xinjiang, and is there any acknowledgement of the international criticism of Beijing's policies there?

There is acknowledgement, but it's framed in this context, again, of a predominantly American plot to try and suppress and contain China by spreading lies and falsehoods about the wonderful developments that have taken place in Xinjiang.

The other thing is that there are a lot of online events and discussion sessions and things like that held by the Communist Party at the sidelines of different forums of the United Nations, particularly the Human Rights Council, which involve countries in the developing world, in which China is basically telling them that they're giving them this window into Xinjiang to push back against "Western lies." You will have an official from Xinjiang, and one or two people who are locals, sometimes a Muslim person who will come and say, "I face no religious oppression. My life is wonderful." And every time one of these events takes place, it gets covered in the *People's Daily*.

How do you assess the tone the *People's Daily* takes towards the U.S. and how anti-American it is these days?

What the paper really reflects is the leadership's worldview that we are in a world which is ideologically divided: it may not be of the same variety as the Cold War, but there is an ideological conflict going on. And it's not just being waged by America, which talks about democracy and authoritarianism. It's also from a Chinese point of view, because Xi Jinping has made a virtue of the superiority of the Chinese system, to not just deliver developmental goals, but also to manage COVID. I think that sense of ideological confrontation is reflected throughout the paper, and obviously the United States is at the heart of that confrontation.

At the same time there is, I think, a glimmer of hope that you will notice from time to time, with the underlying message being that U.S. policy towards China is being held hostage by narrow-minded politicians who are looking for short term gains, and who are not acknowledging that there is a long term relationship with China which has been mutually beneficial. And that relationship can continue, it can remain mutually beneficial. And

American politicians need to realize that that is the case, and get out of their own ideological mindset. And if that shift were to take place, you would see the United States and China coexist, despite the frictions that may be in their systems.



Andrew Peaple is a UK-based editor at *The Wire*. Previously, Andrew was a reporter and editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, including stints in Beijing from 2007 to 2010 and in Hong Kong from 2015 to 2019. Among other roles, Andrew was Asia editor for the Heard on the Street column, and the Asia markets editor.

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