

Promoting the Chinese Dream by Comprehensive Poverty Alleviation? Review of Chinese Communist Party's Centenary in 2021

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Abstract

July 2021 marks the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, which was founded in Shanghai in 1921 with the ideal and ultimate goal to realize communism. When Xi Jinping took office in November 2012, he proposed the “Chinese Dream” to pursue the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation once again under his term of office. To set the people’s wish for a better life is constantly considered and widely propagated as Xi’s top priority to achieve the Chinese Dream. Effectively, the “Two Centenary Goals” are arguably the concrete embodiment of the Chinese Dream, in which the Goals are delicately set to respond to the people’s wish for a better life. While the first centenary goal, which is due in 2021, specifies completely building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, the other goal aims to fully build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful by 2049, the year that marks the People’s Republic of China’s centenary. Consequently, this article critically discusses the allegedly successful story of China’s poverty relief that is politically touted as the “great glory of the Chinese people, the Communist Party of China, and the Chinese nation.” It aims to review the contemporary socioeconomic situation under the banner of the Chinese Dream and draw implications for China and international implications in the 21st Century.

Keywords: 100th Anniversary of CCP’s Founding, Poverty Alleviation, Xi Jinping, Socio-economic Situations, Chinese Dream

*Throughout its 100-year history, the Communist Party of China has been of one mind with the people, breathed the same breath as the people, and shared weal and woe with the people. (我們黨的百年歷史，就是一部黨與人民心連心、同呼吸、共命運的歷史。)*¹

I. Introduction

January 2021 marked the first anniversary of the lockdown of Wuhan city, Central China, following the severe outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic there. Since then, we have seen a pandemic spread from China to the rest of the world, with new variants of the virus emerging and being transmitted quickly. Even with the roll-out of vaccines against the virus that have become gradually available since early this year, the fight against COVID-19 worldwide still remains. At the same time, China has already boasted of its target of at least six percent growth in GDP in March 2021, which Premier Li Keqiang announced in his government work report to the top legislature National People's Congress (NPC). At the Fourth Session of 13th NPC, the draft Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through 2035 was passed unanimously as expected.

In fact, 2021 marks the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was founded in July 1921 in Shanghai. By 2021, one of China's "two centenary goals" (兩個一百年目標) is poised to be announced successfully achieved, in building a moderately prosperous society (xiaokang shehui, 小康社會) in all respects. If so, it means only when the CCP completely eradicates extreme poverty will they be able to claim any genuine grand victory in achieving the country's long-standing national objectives. Meanwhile, to celebrate the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the CCP has also set another centenary goal, to fully build a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful" by 2049, one hundred years since the PRC's establishment in October 1949. These two goals are arranged in a closely

1. Xi Jinping, speaking at the conference on party history learning and education, on February 20, 2021, 〈習近平在黨史學習教育動員大會上強調學黨史悟思想辦實事開新局 以優異成績迎接建黨一百周年〉, *people.cn*, February 21, 2021, <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2021/0221/c64094-32033008.html>>.

interrelated manner that could arguably indicate the core of incumbent government's "Chinese Dream" since Xi Jinping took office in November 2012. The notion of a "Chinese Dream" sheds light on the proclamation Mao Zedong had loudly made on October 1, 1949, in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, that "The Chinese People have stood up." This has likewise echoed the enduring calls since the mid-19th century Qing dynasty to make modern China a "stronger and wealthier" nation against Western intrusion into the mainland.



Figure 1. The “Two Centenary Goals” in the PRC

Source: 〈兩個一百年〉, January 20, 2019, PhotoPhoto.cn, <<https://www.photophoto.cn/pic/31872303.html>>.

II. Completing the Process of Building a Moderately Well-Off Society in All Aspects: Reality or Rhetoric?

Soon after the ten years of catastrophe during Cultural Revolution and the following series of crises of confidence, faith and trust, also dubbed the “three-fold crisis”, the Chinese leaders in the Zhongnanhai (中南海) leadership compound knew fairly well that they ought to restore Chinese people’s confidence in the communist government, to foster people’s faith in Marxism-Leninism, and to strengthen people’s trust in the CCP, so as to uphold the regime. In this regard, the CCP has not only put an end to the policies of “class struggle” and “uninterrupted or permanent revolution” as were primarily practiced in Mao’s era, but have instead implemented economic reforms and opening-up policies since the end of 1978. Ultimately, the CCP hopes to repair and maintain their governing legitimacy as a credible ruling party and permanently

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consolidate their regime.

When Deng Xiaoping returned to office after the disastrous Cultural Revolution and the demise of the “Gang of the Four” in the late 1970s, he originally envisioned the building of a moderately well-off society as China was about to implement the reform and opening-up through the so-called “three-steps”² development strategy. The reform afterwards not only improved the livelihoods of the Chinese people, but had also strengthened the leaders’ political confidence in crafting further roadmap for economic and social developments. In 1997, when Jiang Zemin delivered his political report to the 15th National Party Congress, he highlighted an updated version of the “three-steps” in achieving xiaokang shehui: first step, double China’s GDP by 2010 when compared to the 2000 level, raise levels of prosperity, and form a relatively complete socialist market economy; second step, to further develop the economy and improve various institutions by the centenary of the founding of the CCP; and finally, the third step, to achieve basic modernization and complete the building of a socialist country that is prosperous, democratic, and culturally advanced by the centenary of the founding of the PRC in the middle of the 21st century.

The incumbent President Xi Jinping has eloquently set the “people’s wish for a better life” as one of the primary objectives of his administration when he became General Secretary. In line with this objective, Xi proposed two important slogans, namely, the Chinese Dream and Two Centenary Goals. The two slogans are interrelated in the sense that they will be of significant marks for Xi’s strengthened power base for the likely third term after 2022, and ultimately his political legacy in parallel to those of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

2. Step One is to double GNP from 1980’s level and to ensure that the Chinese people have enough food and clothing. This step was attained by the end of the 1980s. Step Two was to quadruple 1980’s GNP by the end of the 20th century, which was achieved in 1995, ahead of schedule. Lastly, Step Three aims to increase per-capita GNP to the level of the medium-developed countries by the middle of the 21st century.

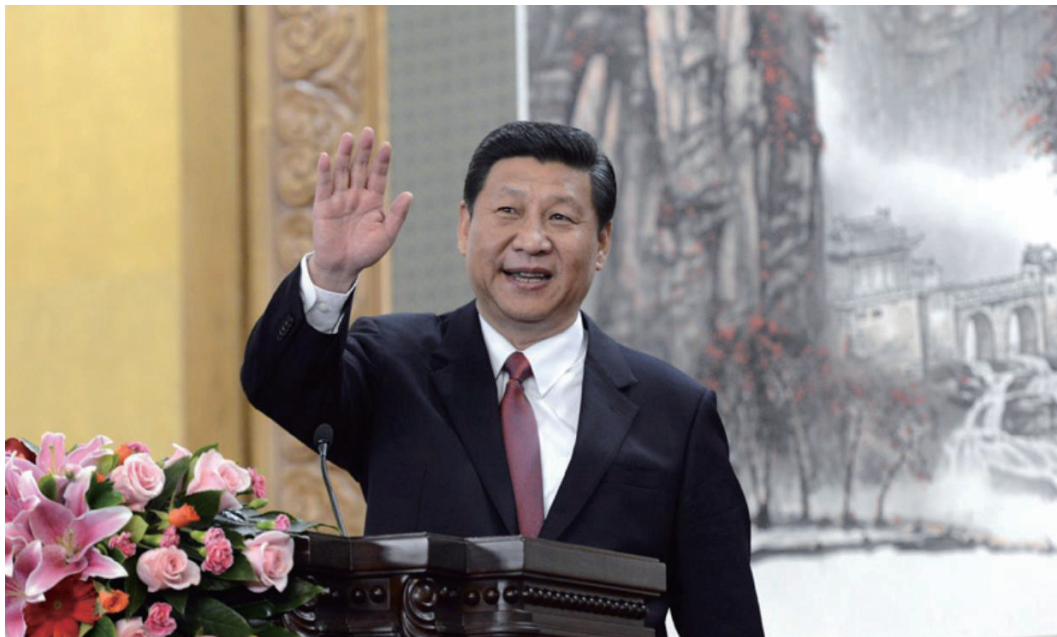


Figure 2. The People's Yearning for a Better Life is Our Goal

Source: 〈習近平：人民對美好生活的嚮往，就是我們的奮鬥目標〉, *China Pictorial*, December 14, 2012, <http://www.rmhb.com.cn/zt/20170601dlfj/CP/201706/t20170614_800098268.html>.

While the “Chinese Dream” is in principal about the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” the “Two Centenary Goals” specifies the CCP’s unique and irreplaceable role leading the Chinese in achieving them. The CCP usually refers to the Chinese socioeconomic situations in the early days as “poor and blank,” but the Chinese authorities have now dramatically transformed it into the second largest economy in the world, with its technology level comparatively outstanding that, for example, in May 2021, their spacecraft successfully landed on Mars.

In other words, the Chinese Dream has effectively addressed the long-held ambitions since the Qing Dynasty in the mid-19th century, for a modern China to become both strong and wealthy. The CCP promises the Chinese people a beautiful dream that they are to live prosperous lives, and China will certainly complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects when it comes to the centenary of the CCP in 2020. Specifically, China’s per capita GDP being on a par with that of moderately developed countries will be successfully achieved by the centenary of the PRC. In the eyes of Chinese leaders, China will be by then a “great

modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious and beautiful.”

III. Political Propaganda and Campaigns Amid the Centenary of the CCP

Through heightened and continued patriotic education in schools, from elementary school to university, together with regular and lavish media coverage, the CCP indoctrinates their glorious “red” history and in the meantime highlights China’s century of humiliation. The Party, according to PRC textbooks, resolutely unites and boldly leads the Chinese people to fight in blood and win the eventual victory of the New Democratic Revolution. To the CCP, the great cause of the socialist revolution and its following reform and opening-up has ushered in a great leap in standing up firmly on the world stage because of accumulated economic wealth and comprehensive national power.

To gear up for the national celebration of the centenary of CCP’s founding on July 1, government officials across Chinese cities have been going into overdrive to extol centenary commemorations at many public places, such as stations, parks, square, movie theaters, schools and so on, broadcasting nationalistic party history, exhibiting posters and paintings of Chinese success stories in completely eradicating national poverty, and honoring revolutionary heroes as well as contemporary communist party leaders.

“Follow the party forever” is arguably the mainstream mantra for the mass activities to mark the centenary of the CCP. Thematic activities around loving the party, loving the nation, and loving socialism are to be accentuated. The Chinese state wishes to further educate Chinese people, in particular younger generations, to stay true to the original aspiration, hold on to the mission, and work hard to make their due contributions in this new era.



Figure 3. Follow the Order of Party, Go with the Party

Source: 〈蘭州：獻禮建黨 100 周年 千架無人機「點亮」黃河之濱〉, *People.cn*, May 6, 2021, <<http://gs.people.com.cn/BIG5/n2/2021/0506/c183348-34710206-4.html>>.

Specifically, the official China Central Television (CCTV) news reported that the publicity and educational activities concerning the centenary are divided into two phases of implementation. Prior to May 2021, the first stage will heavily publicize and carry the spirit of the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC (Communist Party of China), the Two Sessions (National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, or NPC & CPPCC for short), and the keynote speech delivered to a mass gathering to mark China's "poverty alleviation accomplishments and commendation conference" held in February 2021. Meanwhile, one of the most prominent tasks is also to demonstrate the achievements attained during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), and propagandize the bright prospects for the upcoming developments in the 14th Five-Year Plan period (2021-2025). As for the second phase, which will take place from this May to the end of 2021, there is a "high tide" between June and July with the launch of mass activities with outstanding themes and distinctive features.³

3. 〈慶祝中國共產黨成立 100 周年組織開展「永遠跟黨走」群眾性主題宣傳教育活動〉, *People's Daily*, April 12, 2021, <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0412/c64387-32075548.html>>.



Figure 4. China's Poverty Alleviation Accomplishments and Commendation Conference Held in Beijing

Source: 〈全國脫貧攻堅總結表彰大會在京隆重舉行〉, *Wenweipao*, February 25, 2021, <<https://www.wenweipo.com/a/202102/25/AP60372d37e4b04e1918c845cc.html>>.

In this regard, Chinese official sources suggest that more than 100 key works commemorating the centenary encompass a wide range of films, television dramas, operas, documentaries and animated productions. Patriotic films, with titles like “1921”, “Red Boat”, “The Sacrifice” and “The Red Sun”, are just some of the noticeable illustrations. One of the most popular television dramas broadcast from January 2021 is called “Mining Town”, in which it tells the story of the people in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, who have gradually emerged from poverty and moved to being well-off life the support of the Chinese Communist Party’s poverty alleviation policy and their friendly counterparts in Fujian Province. Without directly mentioning President Xi Jinping in the drama but deliberately projecting the hard work of a young village party secretary in enthusiastically eliminating extreme poverty in the countryside, some of the Chinese audience are said to have found their own true feelings in the plot. As the Party tries to gain more young followers, it has incorporated the topic of centennial into popular culture and television dramas. In so doing, along the propaganda

of successful poverty alleviation stories in China, the allegedly “homecoming” of some young people have turned into another high notes of the centenary.



Figure 5. Red Patriotic Films Commemorating the Centennial of the CCP Founding

Source: 〈慶祝中國共產黨成立 100 周年優秀影片展映，萬象影城歡迎各企事業單位包場觀影〉, *NetEase*, April 9, 2021, <<https://www.163.com/dy/article/G7573GKV053871OX.html>>.

In essence, film and television works have always been an important tool utilized by the CCP for their propaganda purposes. Without a doubt, it has become a standard operating procedure to celebrate and/or commemorate the Chinese nation with model films or dramas every time there are major historical and/or political events. After all, literature and art must, as usual, serve the people and serve socialism, according to Chinese political doctrines.⁴

In addition to the timely promotion of red films and dramas, there is also a sharp rise in “red tourism” to visit red attractions such as Jingganshan (井崗山) in Jiangxi province and Zunyi (遵義) in Guizhou province, where there are many well-known historical battle sites and revolutionary bases. This renewed wave of traveling after the COVID-19 crisis is largely answering the eager calls from Xi Jinping when he gave an important speech on February 20, 2021, at a campaign’s launch meeting that requested enhanced efforts to learn party history, as well as to mobilize party members and citizens in the present day.

The important point to note is that China under the CCP and Xi Jinping has obtained and will continue to uphold its rightful place as a global major power. On the one hand, the CCP hopes to seize the great opportunity of the centennial of its founding as persuasive evidence of the importance of maintaining its leadership in the 21st century. Further, it will also promote China’s remarkable records of economic development and China’s rise as a global superpower, thus sending a strong emotional call to continue to unite around the CCP. On the other hand, Xi Jinping would like to take advantage of this patriotic extravaganza to effectively turn himself into a transformative figure on a par with Chinese paramount leaders of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Accordingly, the centennial of the founding of the CCP is itself an arguably integral part of Xi’s efforts to win a third term in 2022 at the 20th Party Congress.

Government officials have frequently spoken out ahead of the centennial about the significance of praising Xi Jinping’s political doctrine, officially known as “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Xi himself and the propaganda machine have all repeatedly emphasized that the New Republic is red, and this color cannot be diluted. Chinese “red rivers and mountains” cannot and shall never change its color, and they are to be handed down from generation to generation. In the days of deeper and steeper decline in China’s ideological arena, urging efforts to strengthen education in revolutionary traditions and patriotism, and to greatly improve ideological and moral education for the young people, seemed to have been necessary. The youth in the new era consequently serve as a principal driving force to continue leading in “mobilizing the whole Party and country to devote

4. 〈文藝為人民服務，為社會主義服務〉, *People’s Daily*, July 26, 1980, <<https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1980/7/26/1/>>.

themselves with full confidence to building a modern socialist country in an all-round way.”⁵



Figure 6. Pudong Development and Opening - 30th Anniversary Theme Exhibition

Source: 〈浦東開發開放 30 周年慶祝大會隆重舉行，習近平發表重要講話〉, *Xinhua News Agency*, November 13, 2020, <<https://reurl.cc/VEa0jQ>>.

IV. Successfully Completed Poverty Alleviation?

The statement “A history of China is a history of the Chinese nation’s struggle against poverty” has been repeatedly used in Chinese textbooks and the party history. Getting rid of poverty has become the common dream that Chinese people have long been striving for, and for Xi Jinping, it is also a decisive part of realizing what he calls the great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation. Over four decades of economic reform, when living stands in cities and townships have mainly improved, it is now clearer that the most arduous and onerous task of building a well-off society in an

5. Xi Jinping, 〈用好紅色資源，傳承好紅色基因，把紅色江山世代代傳下去〉, *Qiushi*, May 15, 2021, <http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2021-05/15/c_1127446859.htm>.

all-round way is to create a moderately prosperous society in the countryside, one where relative poverty rather than absolute poverty is the issue.

On February 25, 2021, when Xi Jinping attended the grand gathering marking China's poverty alleviation accomplishments and honoring model poverty fighters, he sent out a prime message that China has now scored a "complete victory" in its extended fight against poverty. What actually is a "complete victory" in Chinese official interpretations? What is the current poverty line in the PRC?

According to Xi, poverty can be elaborated in two ways: quantitatively speaking, on the one hand, over the past eight years under his leadership, 98.99 million rural poor people living under the poverty line have been lifted out of poverty, and the 832 impoverished counties and 128,000 villages have also been removed from the poverty list. The official proclamations manifest that overall regional poverty been resolved and the arduous task of eradicating absolute poverty completed. Qualitatively speaking, on the other hand, the complete victory suggests that not only the income level of the poor has both increased significantly, but all the people who have been lifted out of poverty have also achieved the "two assurances and three guarantees," in which they are not worrying about food or clothing, and they are all guaranteed compulsory education, basic medical services, and safe housing.

In terms of current Chinese poverty line, the threshold given by National Bureau of Statistics of China is about C¥4,000 per person per year, which is C¥10.96 per day, in rural China, adjusted for inflation and at 2020 prices. Anyone in rural areas earning less than this suggested income is considered to be rural poor.

China's allegedly successful story in completely eradicating poverty has led President and General Secretary Xi Jinping to assert, "This is the great glory of the Chinese people, the Communist Party of China, and the Chinese nation." The official *Xinhua News Agency* has likewise claimed that the Central Committee of the CPC with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has not only created a world miracle in poverty reduction but also solved the problem of absolute poverty that has plagued the Chinese nation for thousands of years. Again, the achievements against poverty solely depend on the strong leadership of the Party, and the Party at large, and the people should unite more closely around the Central Committee of the CPC and forge ahead towards

the realization of the second hundred-year goal.

If we take a close look at what China has said about the great glory and the world miracle, we may have a rather different picture and reading. Firstly, the World Bank in 2015 set international poverty standards at US\$1.9 per person per day, or C¥12.23 at current exchange rates. Yet, compared with China's current poverty line C¥10.96, China still cannot map to international standards. Consequently, if the international poverty line is to be applied to the Chinese situation, there would still be hundreds of millions of poor people below the poverty line, compounded by many other existing discriminatory problems in rural policies and education.

Secondly, people are often skeptical about Beijing's official statistics as they may be manipulated for policy needs. According to Chinese political practices, the moment the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC approved the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2016-2020) in October 2015 that pledged to eradicate poverty, the glorious victory over rural poverty relief and/or alleviation was already rightly written. Whatever the reality of poverty reduction might be in the end, the politically correct rhetoric and messages matter most. The political integrity and credibility of both Xi Jinping and the CCP cannot be challenged and tarnished.

Thirdly, given the fact that the Chinese government had allocated C¥1.6 trillion in poverty reduction work, a huge amount of money in the most poverty-stricken rural areas for investment in roads, infrastructure, and the relocation of 10 million people, the final poverty figures do not tell the whole story. There have been hundreds of thousands of corruption cases reportedly linked to poverty work. In order to receive compensation or funding from the authorities, local officials would rather manufacture poverty by falsifying data in categorizing friends and relatives as poor villagers.⁶ This has eventually made the so-called "Chinese Dream" with Chinese characteristics, in which the degree to which the "Dream" is realized solely depends upon official interpretations than actual investigations.

6. "China poverty: Beijing says it's been eradicated, but what exactly has been achieved?" *Agence France-Presse*, February 24, 2021, <<https://reurl.cc/ZQRk6a>>.



Figure 7. China's Decades-Long War to Eradicate Extreme Poverty Has Yielded Remarkable Results, with President Xi Jinping Declaring A "Major Victory" in 2020

Source: "China poverty: Beijing says it's been eradicated, but what exactly has been achieved?"

Fourthly, while food and clothing in many of the poorest areas in the countryside have on the whole been settled, the guarantees such as compulsory education, basic medical services, housing safety, and safe drinking water remain under-delivered, let alone the protracted war against relative poverty, such as the increasing wealth inequality and the long-standing rural-urban divide. Additionally, tens of thousands of Chinese children are still forced to discontinue their studies in the compulsory stage for various reasons. Furthermore, many poorer people are not effectively covered by any basic medical insurance; they usually cannot receive prompt or appropriate treatments because of insufficient medical facilities, doctors and medical staff, and recurrent undersupply of medication. In many poor rural areas, common illnesses and/or chronic conditions cannot even be treated properly. Housing poverty remains another issue as there are not adequate supplies of low-cost accommodation. Many poor Chinese still lack access to affordable housing; they are simply shut out by soaring land and house prices. With regard to safe drinking water, researchers from Beijing

Tsinghua University have found that at least nearly 100 million Chinese people have to live with unsafe levels of toxic chemicals for their daily drinking water. According to their study, some of these most toxic chemicals have been linked to health problems such as kidney and liver cancer.⁷ These remaining problems are still greatly detracting from China's alleged grand success in comprehensively overcoming (extreme) poverty.



Figure 8. A Polluted River in the Eastern Province of Zhejiang

Source: Echo Xie, "Nearly 100 million Chinese people supplied drinking water with 'unsafe' levels of toxic chemicals."

7. Echo Xie, "Nearly 100 million Chinese people supplied drinking water with 'unsafe' levels of toxic chemicals," *South China Morning Post*, January 16, 2021, <<https://reurl.cc/10E8av>>.

V. Conclusion: Red Gene Inherited in Generations? Implication for CCP's Regime Survival

The Chinese Communist Party has been in power since 1949 and for longer than the Soviet Union, making it the longest-serving Communist Party in history. For over four decades of economic reform and opening up to the outside world, the CCP has now largely reinvented itself as a very powerful Leninist, technological-savvy, one-party dictatorship. The status of being the world's second largest economy and Beijing's apparent moves in projecting national power on the global stage, such as the massive Belt and Road Initiative and recent vaccine diplomacy, have in part contributed to the rise of Chinese nationalism. When U.S. President Biden recently raised the need to prove that democracy is viable and seek urgently to unite with nations against China's increasingly assertive and technological Leninist authoritarianism, CCP officials have instead contemplated exerting its top-down governing system to compete against Western democracies, and enthusiastically offer it to Third World countries as a viable alternative model.

On the centenary of the establishment of the CCP in July 2021 and the upcoming 2022 Party Congress, Beijing will continue to press ahead with countering the rising U.S.-led "coalition of democracies" that overtly targets to contain China's rise as another superpower. Whereas Mr. Biden said that "we are in a competition with China and other countries to win the 21st Century" when he addressed a joint session of Congress in the House Chamber, his Chinese counterpart Mr. Xi responded at the National People's Congress by pointing out that "[Chinese] People born in the 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s have already seen that China can now treat with the world on an equal footing before they are able to go out and see the world." With a perceived national confidence and pride, China is increasingly touting the phrase "Rising East, Declining West." It boasts that its successful model in leveling up comprehensive national power to complete its mission of national rejuvenation, and gradually move towards their designated second goal in the mid-21st century.

In the foreseeable future, the competition between China and the United States will undeniably be a theme of the party's grand celebration, with the Chinese people continuously swept up in patriotic pride on the anniversary. One of the likely slogans of the centennial activities is for future Chinese external relations: "No person and

no force can stop the march of the Chinese people towards better lives.” Whether or not the CCP may actually be able to exploit the party’s centenary and the 20th Party Congress to further boost its prestige, authority and legitimacy, domestically and internationally, remains an open question.

