

China's Foreign Policy Development and U.S.-Sino Relations After the Twentieth Chinese Communist Party Congress

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Abstract

On October 22, 2022, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) concluded its 20th Party Congress, a key political event held twice per decade to unveil the direction of China's domestic and foreign policy. The meeting attracted great interest from international media, but held few surprises for experienced observers. As expected, Chinese leader Xi Jinping started his third term as president, breaking the convention of a two-term/10-year limit established by Deng Xiaoping, and sending a strong message that he is not bound to Party restrictions in his effort to consolidate his personal power. Most commentators have focused on Xi's statement about leading China into a "new age"; this paper considers challenges and criticisms that are likely to arise. In his opening statement, Xi emphasized the goals of preserving national autonomy and sovereignty in foreign relations and pushing back against "external forces," especially those showing support for Taiwan independence. This paper also discusses the likelihood of Chinese foreign relations becoming increasingly confrontational, in part because of Xi's expanding power, and in part because of fundamental differences in values between China and the West, especially concerning democracy and human rights. The greatest threat to Taiwan might not be China's rising material power, but rather Beijing's efforts to overturn established liberal/Western practices on the island-nation.

Keywords: Xi Jinping, 20th Party Congress, External Forces, Taiwan Independence, Power Consolidation

I. Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 20th Party Congress from October 16-22, with party leader Xi Jinping revealing governance plans and major domestic and foreign policy principles for the next five years. Following Party protocol, the seven most powerful members of the Standing Committee of the CCP Political Bureau (including Xi) were “elected” to collectively run the party and national affairs. According to Xi’s opening statement, a guiding principle for foreign relations is to defend the country’s self-autonomy and sovereignty, and to use its power to create, control, and use foreign policy discourses to its advantage. Although Xi never directly mentioned the United States in any of his speeches or signed documents, it is clearly the country that is attracting the greatest concern among CCP leaders. Xi used the term “external



Figure 1. Xi Jinping at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China

Source: 〈中國共產黨第二十次全國代表大會在京開幕習近平代表第十九屆中央委員會向大會作報告〉, October 16, 2022, 《中國政府網》, <http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/16/content_5718884.htm>.

forces” to refer to the U.S. and all other countries that might intervene in Chinese “domestic affairs” — such as the “Taiwan issue.” Two important differences between Xi’s 20th Party Congress statement and those he gave at the two preceding Congresses were his direct promises to “oppose Taiwan independence and propose unification” and to “fight against any intervention from external forces.” These statements stand out from the otherwise standard declarations given at all Party Congresses.

Xi cemented conditions for remaining in power by appointing the entire Politburo Standing Committee for the next five years; its members are all junior to Xi and have histories of working with him during his time in Fujian Province. The Committee selection process is notorious for its lack of transparency, but this year the information was more tightly controlled than usual. Their identities were a closely held secret until the last moment, and while no one in the China-watching media correctly predicted all the selections, they were uniformly surprised by Xi’s lack of compromise with other Party factions. He confirmed his total control over standing member selection, which flies in the face of the conventional process of collective CCP leadership. A curious interlude occurred when Xi’s frail predecessor, Hu Jintao, was openly removed from a committee meeting at Xi’s behest—an event that shocked the international media, but did not affect the stoic appearances of Xi and the other committee members.

Xi’s concentration of decision-making power clearly has significant implications for China’s foreign relations, with decisions increasingly influenced by idiosyncratic factors such as Xi’s temperament, personal beliefs, and preferences, as opposed to consensual discussions among party members or institutional rules and procedures. This is of great concern to China watchers who are acutely aware of why institutional norms and rules were established following the Cultural Revolution and the autocratic rule of Mao Zedong. During the Congress, Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu promised that the Party’s foreign affairs arm would adhere to Xi’s policy beliefs and confront all countries attempting to interfere with Chinese sovereignty.¹ Such admonitions

1. “To make ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ on the way down, high Chinese foreign affairs official vows to struggle and fight with others under Xi’s instruction,” *Voice of America*, October 20, 2022, <<https://www.voacantonese.com/a/china-top-diplomat-vows-continuing-fighting-spirit-20221020/6797779.html>>.

“to struggle and fight” to defend the interests of a political leader and the CCP are reminiscent of Maoist slogans used in the 1950s-1970s.

China observers are well aware of the frequency with which Xi’s words are contradicted by foreign policy-related behavior. For example, he told the Party Congress that China wants to build an international community based on a shared destiny for all humankind, that China would never be rightly described as a hegemon, and that China is not interested in territorial expansion. However, over the past decade the country has become increasingly assertive in the South China Sea,² used its influence to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries, and interfered with political and civil affairs in countries such as Taiwan and Australia.³ China has also been accused of practicing “debt-trap diplomacy” through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁴ These and other controversial actions have resulted in a significant loss of international trust in the Chinese leadership, in many cases feeding the perception of China as a threat to global stability.

This paper uses Xi’s published comments, spoken statements, and high-level personnel decisions to assess the current and future development of Chinese foreign policy following the 20th Party Congress. Since Sino-U.S. relations are perceived by the Chinese leadership as a topmost priority, it speculates on potential changes in those relations during Xi’s third term. While many commentators see dramatic changes as unlikely, others see Xi as entering a period in which he feels secure about his personal power, meaning that he can give more attention to relations with Western countries, especially the U.S. It appears increasingly likely that he will dial up the intensity of confrontations rather than try to facilitate better diplomatic relations.

2. Hung-jen Wang, “China’s Assertive Relational Strategies: Engagement, Boycotting, Reciprocation and Press,” *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 3, September 2018, pp. 1-26.

3. Paolo Messa, *The Age of Sharp Power* (Milano: Bocconi University Press, 2019), pp. 1-115.

4. Pádraig Carmody, Tim Zajontz, & Ricardo Reboledo, “From ‘debt diplomacy’ to donorship? China’s changing role in global development,” *Global Political Economy*, August 2022, pp. 1-20.

II. Assessing China's Foreign Relations: Economic and Military Issues

In his opening Party Congress statement, Xi mentioned principles that have occupied the center of China's foreign policy during the past decade: "the entire nation's security," "great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics," "five principles of peaceful co-existence," "economic globalization" and "global initiatives"—primarily the BRI, which he introduced as a global economic strategy in 2013.⁵ He addressed both economic and military concerns in his speech, especially economic globalization with continued investment in BRI. He will likely integrate economic and military interests during his third term, treating the nation's economy as a national security issue, and promoting a strong Chinese military as a requirement for economic security. He described the BRI as expanding, improving in terms of quality, and becoming increasingly institutionalized over the next five years. Although the project has been strongly criticized for saddling developing countries with massive amounts of debt and as a shield for military expansionism, Xi has made it clear that the initiative will remain at the center of China's foreign trade and economic relations. In his statement, Xi described China as being on the "just side" of multilateralism and democratization in international relations, motivated by a strong interest in promoting both economic globalization and global governance reforms. These points represent a very different assessment of China's economic achievements from 10 years ago—an expression of his goal of promoting a China-led economic order as an alternative to the established Western order, which he calls "modernization with Chinese characteristics." He continues to portray his leadership motivation as guiding China in making the transition from a global economic participant to the world's most successful competitor.

Xi's opening statement emphasized three points on military issues: positioning security as China's primary concern for the next five years (requiring a strong military under the absolute control of the CCP); a new type of international relations constructed on opposition to hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism, protectionism,

5. Xi Jinping, 〈習近平代表第十九屆中央委員會向大會作報告 (Full text of Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China)〉, *People's Daily*, October 16, 2022, <<http://cpc.people.com.cn/20th/n1/2022/1017/c448334-32546342.html>>.

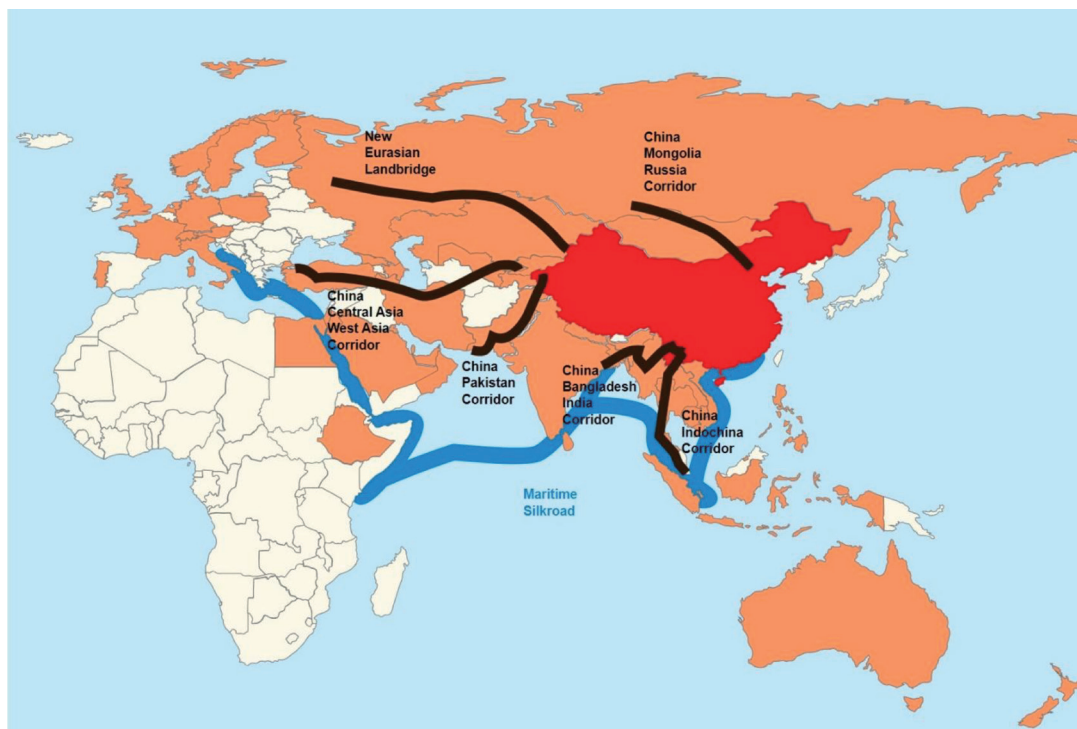


Figure 2. The Belt and Road Initiative

Source: Lommes, “The Belt and Road Initiative,” May 14, 2017, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belt_and_Road_Initiative#/media/File:One-belt-one-road.svg>.

and “bullying of any kind” (clearly referring to the United States); and the standard expression of China’s interest in an autonomous and peaceful foreign policy based on the principle that all countries should respect each other’s sovereignty, avoid double standards, and not intervene in the affairs of other countries (hinting at China’s position on the Russia-Ukraine war). According to international media coverage of the Congress, Xi’s military comments attracted the greatest attention. In a *New York Times* article under the headline “China’s Leader Strikes a Defiant Note, Warning of Stormy Seas,” the reporters acknowledged that Xi’s comments treated the U.S. as a hostile party, even though it was not mentioned by name.⁶ The article seemed to confirm the

6. Chris Buckley, Keith Bradsher, Vivian Wang, & Austin Ramzy, “China’s Leader Strikes a Defiant Note, Warning of Stormy Seas,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/16/world/asia/china-congress-xi-jinping.html>>.

idea that China has become the primary threat to global society in general and the United States in particular, and that confrontations involving the two global powers will continue.

In another article under the headline “An allied strategy for China after the 20th Party Congress,” researchers from the *Atlantic Council* argued that Xi’s comments on military strategy indicate greater confidence in Chinese participation in global affairs, thus pressuring the West to come up with a new strategy in response to China’s increasing willingness to bend or violate international rules.⁷ The international community is increasingly showing concern about Xi’s perceived intentions to unilaterally alter the *status quo* in Asia and to confront the established China-U.S. balance of power in the region. According to the *Atlantic Council* article, China’s long-term goal is to promote a Chinese understanding of democracy among its Asian neighbors, one that advances China’s international status and unilaterally alters the *status quo*.⁸ The article gives a sense of inevitability regarding a major confrontation between the two powers.

In summary, Xi’s opening statement described a world in which global economic and security development projects are all somehow connected to the BRI, thus creating the need for military modernization and expansion.⁹ In response to the current international situation, which he described as filled with coexisting risks and opportunities, Xi expressed his desire to continue using economic leverage to gain support from developing countries, and to promote “democracy with Chinese characteristics” based on Chinese discourse power in international society. He used

7. Matthew Kroenig, Jeffrey Cimmino, David O. Shullman, Colleen Cottle, & Emma Verges, “An allied strategy for China after the 20th Party Congress,” *Atlantic Council*, October 18, 2022, <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/an-allied-strategy-for-china-after-the-20th-party-congress/>>.

8. Matthew Kroenig, Jeffrey Cimmino, David O. Shullman, Colleen Cottle, & Emma Verges, “An allied strategy for China after the 20th Party Congress.”

9. Shannon Tiezzi, “Xi’s Work Report to the 20th Party Congress: 5 Takeaways,” *The Diplomat*, October 18, 2022, <<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/xis-work-report-to-the-20th-party-congress-5-takeaways/>>.



Figure 3. China Seeks to Dominate and Reduce U.S. Influence in Asia

Source: Depositphotos.

the 20th Party Congress to make clear his desire to use expanding military power to achieve economic and political objectives, with the long-term goal of transforming China into a great power that other countries follow and learn from¹⁰ —a goal with similarities to China’s historical *Tianxia* (“all under heaven”) approach to governance.

III. Assessing Sino-U.S. Relations in the Context of Taiwan

China’s relationship with the United States has so far failed under Xi, with the two countries lacking consensus on any common interests beyond expressing verbal support for global environmental protection. One of the most contentious issues is

10. “Despite challenges, Xi makes clear that his ambitions for China can and will be met,” *South China Morning Post*, October 17, 2022, <<https://www.scmp.com/comment/article/3196165/despite-challenges-xi-makes-clear-his-ambitions-china-can-and-will-be-met>>.

Taiwan, especially its membership or participation in international organizations and global acceptance of Beijing's "One China" principle. In his opening Party Congress statement, Xi mentioned the "Taiwan issue" as one of his highest priorities during his third term. Whereas CCP policy in previous Congresses emphasized peaceful unification, this year's Congress emphasized "external foreign forces," "opposing Taiwan independence," and "never renouncing the right to use force over Taiwan." In Xi's words:¹¹

We have put forward an overall policy framework for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era, and facilitated cross-Strait exchanges and cooperation. We have resolutely opposed separatist activities aimed at "Taiwan independence" and foreign interference. We have thus maintained the initiative and the ability to steer cross-Strait relations. Taiwan is China's Taiwan. Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, a matter that must be resolved by the Chinese. We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort, but we will never promise to renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary. This is directed solely at interference by outside forces and the few separatists seeking "Taiwan independence" and their separatist activities.

Retaining the military option for Taiwan is not a new policy, but the strength of Xi's political message was exceptional when compared with previous statements, implying an intention to resolve the issue once and for all during his third term. According to Kroenig et al., Xi's statement represents a "nullification of the tacit centerline in the Taiwan Strait through the suggestion of armed coercion."¹² Kroenig et al. also remind us of the hastily organized and executed military exercises in the waters surrounding Taiwan in response to a visit by members of U.S. Congress led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi less than three months prior to the CCP Congress; the visit may have contributed to the intensity of Xi's comments. If we are to believe Xi's stated intentions, during the next few years we can expect increasing use of Chinese military exercises aimed at intimidating and threatening Taiwan.

11. Xi Jinping, 〈習近平代表第十九屆中央委員會向大會作報告〉.

12. Matthew Kroenig, Jeffrey Cimmino, David O. Shullman, Colleen Cottle, & Emma Verges, "An allied strategy for China after the 20th Party Congress."



Figure 4. The Dong-Feng 15 Ballistic Missile

Source: Depositphotos.

There is a growing international consensus that Taiwan should no longer be considered a Chinese domestic issue, despite the claims of the Beijing leadership. A few minor personnel changes in China's Taiwan Affairs Office hint at treating Taiwan as a diplomatic issue¹³: the three most recent directors (Wang Yi, Zhang Zhijun and Liu Jieyi) all served in the country's Foreign Affairs Ministry prior to their new appointments by Xi Jinping. On the other hand, it is impossible to separate Xi's Taiwan and U.S. policies; therefore we can expect him to do what he can to sabotage U.S.-Taiwan interactions, and to enforce sanctions against any nation identified as violating China's official position on the Taiwan issue.

¹³ Yong Xiang, "China is navigating 'grim and complex international situation' says Xi without naming any countries," *CNN News*, October 16, 2022, <<https://edition.cnn.com/asia/live-news/china-party-congress-10-16-22-intl-hnk/index.html>>.

IV. Conclusions

There are several important takeaways from the 20th Party Congress, the first being strong confirmation that Xi Jinping is in complete control, and that CCP rules are being tailored to fit his preferences. Xi's success in consolidating his power and diminishing the impact of internal party divisions suggest that his third term will be marked by stability and the absence of any resistance to his policy decisions. Second,

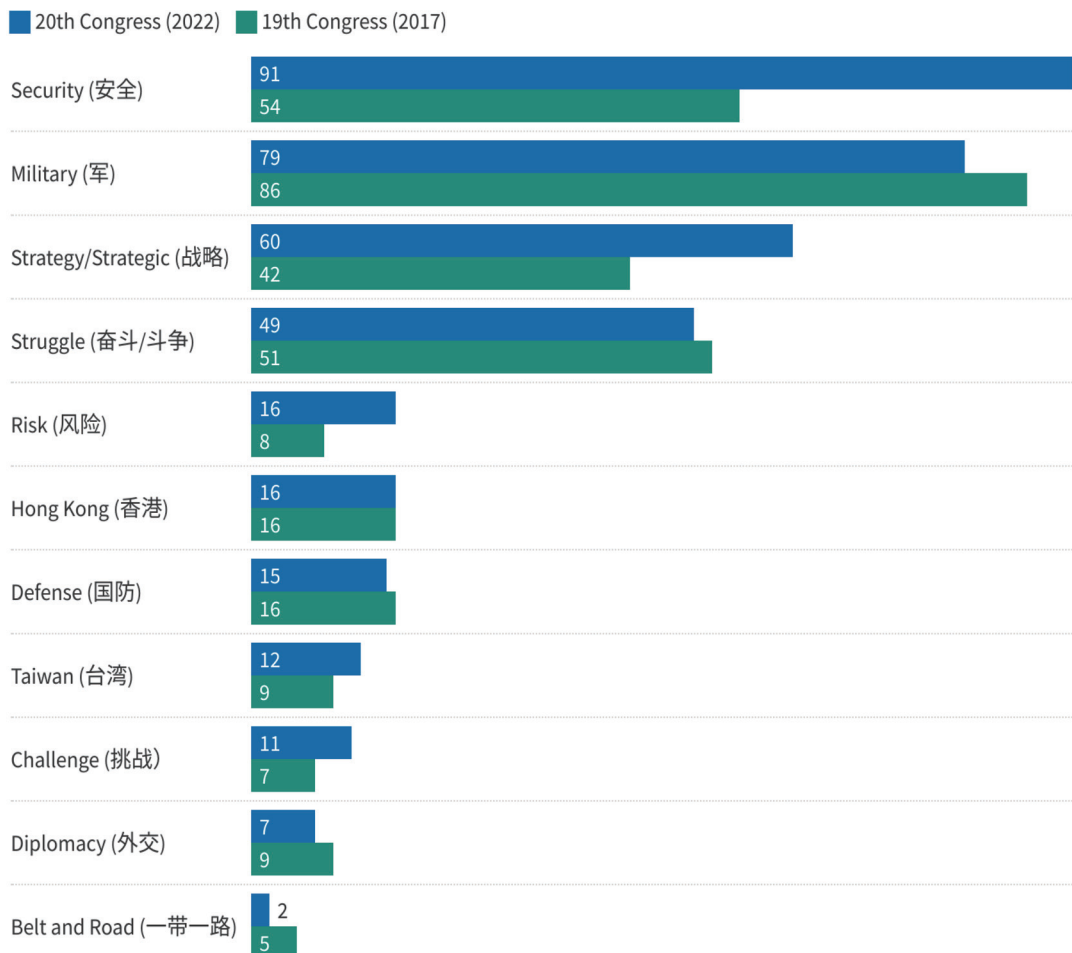


Figure 5. Mentions of Key Phrases in Xi Jinping's Party Congress Report

Source: Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Matthew P. Funairole, & Samantha Lu, "China's 20th Party Congress Report: Doubling Down in the Face of External Threats," October 19, 2022, *CSIS*, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-20th-party-congress-report-doubling-down-face-external-threats>>.

Xi's opening speech showed that he is working according to a 10-year rather than a five-year governance plan. In addition to underscoring his expectation that he will hold supreme power throughout that period, the speech also confirmed the potential for a foreign policy strategy built on increasing assertiveness and willingness to engage in confrontation. Third, the Chinese populace is certain to hear the word "security" many times as a governance priority, indicating a shift from previous descriptions of foreign policy as an extension of domestic economic stability.

Fourth, we can expect greater tension in Sino-U.S. relations during the next five years as both great powers adjust to a more conflict-oriented relationship. Trade issues will continue to fluctuate in importance depending on the makeup of American presidential administrations, but a more important problem is reducing the potential for misunderstandings that could have serious consequences.

Last, regardless of how many times Xi describes Taiwan as a domestic concern, Taiwan will continue to be treated by other countries as an international issue. Any resolution for serious consideration can only occur within the frameworks of Chinese relations with the U.S. and other Western countries. During Xi's third term, we can expect to see the CCP's Taiwan policy constructed with input from Wang Huning (a political theorist with a strong anti-American worldview) and Wang Yi (a long-term Foreign Ministry bureaucrat and Taiwan Affairs Office Director between 2007 and 2013)—two individuals with strong attachments to a "One China" policy. For Taiwanese leaders, particular attention must be paid to Wang Huning, who is expected to aggressively attack the Western liberal democratic values that Taiwan shares with the United States and other countries. Arguably what is most threatening to Taiwan is not China's military, but its efforts to control how the issue is debated within the international community.