

The 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: What Next?

by Beatrice Gallelli

The 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as widely expected and reported, confirmed Xi Jinping's position as general secretary of the CCP for a norm-breaking third term. But this is not the only reason why this Congress marks an historical change and has profound implications for both domestic and foreign policy.

The end of intra-Party democracy

Long before the Congress, various signs suggested that Xi had no intention to leave. The two most obvious were, first, the amendment to the country's Constitution with the abolition of the two-term presidential limit, which used to be the only institutional constraint, as the party general secretary has no temporal limitations; second, the lack of a designated successor. No successor emerged at this Congress either, a hint that Xi may stay in power even more than five years.¹

¹ Zhuang Pinghui, "No Obvious Successor to Xi Jinping in Chinese Communist Party's New

The limit of two consecutive terms for the president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in the 1980s with the aim of avoiding the concentration of power in the hands of one leader. The mechanism at the heart of the collective leadership was "intra-party democracy" characterised by a competition between two main forces within the CCP: on the one hand, those with a high-ranking family background, the so-called princelings; on the other, the *tuanpai*, coming from the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL). Xi is a princeling; his predecessor Hu Jintao, as well as the current premier Li Keqiang, were members of the *tuanpai*. With the 20th National Congress, the role of "intra-party democracy" has been weakened substantially: it is mentioned in passing towards the end of the report, while at least once it was included in the first section, the one dealing with the goals achieved in the

Leadership Team", in *South China Morning Post*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3196953/no-obvious-successor-xi-jinping-chinese-communist-partys-new-leadership-team>.

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previous five years.² The weakening of “intra-party democracy” in the political report embeds a political change. When the 79-year-old Hu was led – apparently against his will, officially for health reasons – to leave the Congress, it looked like the symbolical defeat of the *tuanpai*.

The list of the new composition of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) unveiled on 23 October further confirms the end of the intra-party democracy era.³ All the newly elected members are Xi Jinping’s allies. The current second-in-command after Xi, CCP General Secretary in Shanghai Li Qiang, worked closely with Xi in the early 2000s. The mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic in Shanghai this spring as well as his lack of experience in national government have not affected Li’s political rise. He is expected to become the new Premier of the State Council replacing Li Keqiang early next year. In the PSC, loyalty seems to have become a virtue more valued than capacities, performance and government experience.

² The official full transcription of the *Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China* published in Chinese is longer than the versions read by Xi at the Congress. In this latter “intra-party democracy” does not occur. The longer version is available at: http://www.news.cn/politics/2022-10/25/c_1129079429.htm. The official English translation at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html.

³ Joe McDonald, “China’s Xi Expands Powers, Promotes Allies”, in *AP News*, 23 October 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/21fa1812435b563f2532effb4fe5758e>; Xiao Zibang, Sarah Zheng and Krystal Chia, “The Seven Men Who Will Lead China into Xi’s Third Term”, in *Bloomberg*, 23 October 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-23/the-seven-men-who-will-lead-china-into-xi-s-third-term>.

Xi’s grip on power has also been symbolically reinforced. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Xi had already had his “thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” enshrined into the Party Constitution.⁴ The 20th Party Congress officially elevated Xi to the “core” of the Party Central Committee and the Party as a whole,⁵ a title that in the past had only been reserved to CCP founder and PRC first leader Mao Zedong, his successor Deng Xiaoping, and PRC President and CCP leader in the 1990s Jiang Zemin.⁶

What Xi’s new era means for China’s domestic politics

Another crucial expression that disappeared from the political lexicon of the Party is “political reforms”, which had previously signalled (especially under Wen Jiabao’s premiership in 2003–2013) a willingness to strengthen the public’s participation in China’s political life.⁷ In the 2017 political report, “political reforms” were mentioned only once – and now they are gone. In their place, the centrality of the CCP is

⁴ China’s State Council, *Full Text of Resolution on Amendment to CPC Constitution*, 24 October 2017, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/10/24/content_281475919837140.htm.

⁵ “Full Text of Resolution on Party Constitution Amendment”, in *Xinhua*, 22 October 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20221022/fea670f419d7426ab564a795d5737b52/c.html>.

⁶ It is worth noting that Jiang Zemin was elevated as “core” thanks to Deng Xiaoping and in a moment of crisis for the CCP following the 1989 crackdown on the so-called Tiananmen Movement.

⁷ David Bandurski, “Premier Wen Calls for Political Reform, Again”, in *CMP Headlines & Hashtags*, 15 September 2011, <https://chinamediaproject.org/?p=15455>.

emphasised: the “red” formula “Party, government, military, society and education, east, west, south, north, the Party leads everything” articulated at the 19th Party Congress well sums up this trend.

In parallel, a key expression that has gained importance is “national security”. In the political report issued this year, for the first time, an entire section (#11) explains the need to “protect national security and social stability”. The discourse on “national security” is informed with a paradigmatic change in the overall strategy of governance and the top-down approach to state-society relations.⁸ The relationship between economic growth and social stability has been turned upside down: it is no longer the first that guarantees the latter. “National stability” and social stability have become ends in themselves, as leading expert Taisu Zhang poignantly maintains.⁹

The new paradigm is “prevention” as the top priority.¹⁰ This implies that all the events that harm or “could” harm China’s “national security” should be “prevented” and justify state intervention. The “reeducation” camps for non-Han nationalities in Xinjiang

are the most extreme – but not the only – example of this preventive approach.¹¹ The entire society is going through a process of “securitisation”¹² applied through preventive repression, which is no longer directed only to those who openly constitute a threat to the CCP rule, but also to all those who do not express open dissent but attempt to change the system from within.

What the Congress tells us about China’s foreign policy

While the CCP’ National Congress is fundamentally inward-looking, it also provides a few insights into how China’s leaders perceive the international environment. The political report suggests a growing anxiety due to the “global changes of a magnitude not seen in a century” over the past five years and the “high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms” expected in the future.¹³ This pessimistic view is justified by the worsening relations with the United States and the EU, and, in turn, pushes China to rely only on itself and adjust its foreign policy accordingly.

US–China relations have deteriorated rapidly over the past decade. Under the administration of former President Donald Trump (2017–21), US–China relations turned into an

⁸ Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Internal Security & Grand Strategy: China’s Approach to National Security under Xi Jinping*, testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 28 January 2021, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01/Sheena_Chestnut_Greitens_Testimony.pdf.

⁹ Taisu Zhang, “If there is a deeper change in this year’s Party Congress speech...”, *Twitter*, 16 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/ZhangTaisu/status/1581672983386804224>.

¹⁰ National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China (2015), Section 1, Article 9.

¹¹ Beatrice Gallelli, “China’s Official Narratives on Xinjiang: Interethnic Mingling, Economic Prosperity and Religious Terrorism”, in *Asia Maior*, Special issue No. 2 (2022), p. 51-71, <https://www.asiamaior.org/?p=1564>.

¹² Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder/London, Lynne Rienner, 1998.

¹³ Xi Jinping, *Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, cit.

open competition. Under President Joe Biden, the tone has changed, but the competition has intensified. The Biden administration has recently introduced measures to bar US companies and foreign companies using US equipment from exporting critical chip-manufacturing tools to China. The measure also prohibits US citizens and companies from providing direct or indirect support to Chinese companies operating in the chip-manufacturing field.¹⁴ China's reply to this is "technological independence" (*keji ziliziqiang*), to be achieved through scientific and technological innovation driven by Chinese "talents" and know-how.

However, the hottest point in US–China relations is arguably Taiwan. After several statements by President Joe Biden that seemed to signal an end to US "strategic ambiguity" on the matter resulting in irritation on the Chinese side, tensions reached their peak after Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, visited the island in early August 2022.¹⁵ China followed that up with major military exercises around the island. Taiwan has become a cause of friction also in EU–China relations, especially after a "Taiwanese representative office" – the first representative office in Europe

¹⁴ Demetri Sevastopulo and Kathrin Hille, "US Hits China with Sweeping Tech Export Controls", in *Financial Times*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6825bee4-52a7-4c86-b1aa-31c100708c3e>.

¹⁵ Olli Pekka Suorsa and Adrian Ang U-Jin, "Crossing the Line: The Makings of the 4th Taiwan Strait Crisis?", in *The Diplomat*, 17 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/crossing-the-line-the-makings-of-the-4th-taiwan-strait-crisis>.

explicitly mentioning Taiwan instead of Taipei – opened in Lithuania's capital Vilnius in 2021, to which China's leadership reacted with coercive economic measures impacting not just Lithuania but the EU as a whole.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, the "Taiwan issue" gained more visibility at the 20th Party Congress than in past Congresses.

The political report reiterates that "peaceful reunification" is China's preferred option, but it also makes clear that the "use of force" is not excluded – a possibility not mentioned in the previous reports. Another novelty is in the emphasis on the "outside forces" that attempt to "interfere" and the "few separatists seeking "Taiwan independence".¹⁷ Here the CCP is addressing directly the US and the current Taiwanese administration of President Tsai Ing-wen.

Furthermore, a shift of the CCP's attention towards the Global South is evident. Concepts like the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI) – mostly addressed to countries in the Global South – have gained official recognition. Conversely, the Belt and Road Initiative, previously the flagship initiative of Xi's foreign policy, has been downgraded to a mostly commercial endeavour.

Overall, the 20th Party Congress confirms the continuation of

¹⁶ Brian Hioe, "What's Behind Lithuania's Outreach to Taiwan?", in *The Diplomat*, 13 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/whats-behind-lithuanias-outreach-to-taiwan>.

¹⁷ Xi Jinping, *Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China*, cit.

"Xiplomacy", characterised by a more assertive approach to the challenges coming from an international environment perceived as ever more hostile. On the one hand, no tolerance will be shown to those threatening China's "core interests"; on the other, China will stretch its hand toward those countries with which it shares a "pragmatic" approach aimed to achieve shared "development and security".¹⁸

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¹⁸ "Xiplomacy: China-proposed Initiatives Focus on Global Development, Security", in *Xinhua*, 13 September 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220913/f161157611ad4eadba563d273c601ec4/c.html>.

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