

# Xi Jinping Seeks Stability: The 20th National Congress of the CCP

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The 2,340 odd teacups have been rearranged in their cupboards, and sobriety has returned to the Great Hall of the People. What is the national and international impact of the 20<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress that was concluded on Saturday 22 October 2022? Stability is the key word.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, the country's first and major concern was to be recognized as a nation state on an equal par with others in the post-World War II world order. As the Western world recognized the nationalist government of the Republic of China (Taiwan) as the legal government and representative of "China" in the United Nations, the PRC turned to the Soviet Union for support, despite earlier ill-fated cooperation between the Communist Parties of the two countries. On 14 February 1950, Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin concluded the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance.<sup>1</sup> The disastrous outcome of Mao's "Great Leap Forward",<sup>2</sup> however, brought the "friendship" to a premature end.

Afterwards, China increasingly portrayed itself as the "third way" in between the United States and the USSR. That the rhetoric of decolonization brought the country ideologically closer to countries in the global south proved to be of major importance in voting the PRC into the UN in 1971. It is arguably this acceptance of the PRC as a sovereign nation state by the rest of the world that enabled Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) to start his open-door policies<sup>3</sup> at the end of the 1970s. From "ideology dominates economics" under Mao, China went to "economics dominate ideology".

Deng Xiaoping could develop his economic reform policies, which have become referred to as "developmental nationalism", under Hu Yaobang (1915–1989), General Secretary of the CCP from 1982 to 1987, and Zhao Ziyang (1919–2005), Prime Minister from 1980 to 1987. Reform-minded CCP leaders such as Jiang Zemin (1926–), General Secretary of the CCP from 1989 to 2002, or the "economic tsar" Zhu Rongji (1928–), China's Prime Minister between 1998 and 2003, continued to occupy key economic positions until 2012, when Xi Jinping was elected General Secretary of the CCP.

"Developmental nationalism" transformed the PRC into the second economic power of the world. Yet the view that the implosion of the Soviet Union was caused by a lack of ideological rigidity within its Communist Party and by the fact that the Soviet armed forces were no longer loyal to the Party, produced fears for a similar scenario in the CCP. This helps to explain the return of "ideology dominates economics" in the Xi Jinping era.

## **Ideology over Economics**

During the Xi Jinping era, the perceived threat of weakening ideological zeal has translated into such policies as the fight against corruption within the Party, and the (dynamic) zero-COVID policy (primarily inspired by the poor state of medical care in rural areas, and the chaos and death toll that overcharged facilities would bring about). Another central tenet has been the redistribution of wealth to alleviate the gap that had developed during the previous decades; this redistribution policy was started under the leadership of State President Hu Jintao (2002–2012) and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (2003–2013). Characteristic of the Xi Jinping era is that the state has retaken control of larger parts of the economy, in line with Xi's "(domestic and international) dual circulation"<sup>4</sup> strategy. To swiftly implement all these policies, more power has been concentrated within the central bodies of the CCP, to the detriment of the government.

Against the expectations of many, economic liberalization and the inclusion of China in the global economy thus have not made China more democratic. Many have now come to "fear" a rising China. Fear, however, is not a good policy adviser. After all the pump and circumstance, and the drama of the closing session, a sober analysis of the outcome of the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress is required, set against the historical developments sketched above.

## Who Is Out?

The speeches delivered during the opening and closing sessions of the 20<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress hint at a continuation of "ideology dominating economics". The baseline remains that "The central task of the CCP is [...] to promote the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in a comprehensive manner under Chinese-style modernization"<sup>5</sup> – the latter being a new term added to the familiar "rejuvenation" slogan. This "Chinese-style modernization" appears to boil down to further introducing ideology in the CCP's actual policies: "Practice tells us why the CCP is capable; why socialism with Chinese characteristics is good. In the final analysis, this is the Marxist line, [namely] the line of the Sinification of Marxism".<sup>6</sup>

This seems to be confirmed by the absence from any position of power of all initial frontrunners for the prestigious post of premier who are – or were – affiliated to more "pragmatic" factions of the CCP. "Liberal" reformer Wang Yang, a compromise figure between outgoing premier Li Keqiang, who belongs to the so-called *Tuanpai* (CCP Youth League) faction of the CCP led by former leader Hu Jintao; Han Zheng, who belongs to former State President's Jiang Zemin's so-called "Shanghai faction"; up-and-coming *Tuanpai* member Hu Chunhua, who desperately tried to prove his loyalty to Xi over the last few months by eulogizing him in state media: all were originally seen as contenders for the premiership but are now not included in the 25-member Politburo – let alone the elite 7-member Standing Committee. Incumbent premier Li Keqiang himself – despite not having reached the retirement age of 68 – does not even figure among the 205 members of the next Central Committee.

This seems to indicate that the continuing anti-corruption campaign is not only directed against the Shanghai faction, as was often thought after the fall of Jiang-associate Zhou Yongkang in 2014, but potentially against all non-Xi affiliated CCP

officials that have wielded power since the launch of Deng Xiaoping's "opening up" policies. Several of these former leaders, such as Jiang Zemin, Zhu Rongji, Wang Qishan, and Wu Bangguo, were notably absent from the opening and closing ceremonies of the congress. Song Ping, the 105-year-old Dengist reformer considered instrumental in the rise of Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao, was in attendance as a frail-looking Hu was escorted out of the room during the closing ceremony in front of the cameras of sparsely invited foreign journalists. Hu's pat on the shoulder of his closest *Tuanpai* ally Li Keqiang on his way out seems emblematic for how times have changed.

After this Party Congress, we will have to look at the CCP from a different perspective – the Xi, Jiang and Hu factions appear to have been exchanged for different degrees of closeness to Xi Jinping and his policy priorities. That Chen Quanguo, the current governor of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, is not listed among the 205 Central Committee members despite his seemingly unwavering fealty to Xi may be a first case in point – the Xinjiang issue has largely deteriorated China's international standing.

### **Who Is In?**

Who was chosen for the Standing Committee of the Politburo then? On the morning of 23 October, six men stepped onto the stage with Xi Jinping (squashing rumours that the size of the Committee might be expanded). In order of prominence: Li Qiang, the Party Secretary of Shanghai, who is to take over the position of premier from the now disempowered Li Keqiang; Zhao Leji, the powerful anti-corruption tsar, who will preside over the National People's Congress; Wang Huning, the first secretary of the secretariat, seen as Xi's ideologue, who is to become chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference; Cai Qi, Party secretary of Beijing and arguably Xi's most devoted supporter out of what already are six loyalists, who will lead the Central Secretariat of the CCP; Ding Xuexiang, who knows Xi from his short stint in Shanghai in 2007 and will be responsible for internal discipline; and Li Xi, who earned his stripes in the revolutionary city of Yan'an, and is to become the first-ranked vice-premier.

It is noteworthy that these six have either engaged with ideological work and only have local administrative experience, or have apparently made it to the Standing Committee because of their direct allegiance to Xi. Politicians with significant economic experience have vanished from the Standing Committee, with specialists Li Keqiang and Liu He retiring. Xi's inclination to "ideology over economics", as well as to stability – and therefore personal loyalty – is apparent.

As the entire Standing Committee, the large majority of the 25-member Politburo (which for the first time since 1997 does not include any women), and the 205 Central Committee members, are direct or indirect Xi-loyalists, Xi Jinping has further cemented his core position within the Party. This is also visible in the so-called "appropriate modification"<sup>7</sup> that has been done to the Party Charter,<sup>8</sup> to which the following sentence was added: "Establishing the status of Comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the Party's Central Committee and of the whole Party and to establish the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era".<sup>9</sup> From now on, this sentence will appear in shorthand form as the "Two

Establishes and Two Safeguards”.<sup>10</sup> The concentration of ever more power within the central bodies of the CCP, to the detriment of the government, can be expected to continue.

## **Policy Priorities**

Internal security will remain a major focus. Xi Jinping used the term “security”<sup>11</sup> 89 times during his opening speech, a sharp increase from the 55 mentions at the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, although this year’s speech was significantly shorter. This stood in sharp contrast with the fewer mentions of “reform”.<sup>12</sup> “Security” includes the way the PRC is dealing with the COVID-pandemic. No changes are announced here: Xi Jinping stated that “China will adhere to ‘people first, life first’ and the adherence to dynamic Zero-COVID does not falter”.<sup>13</sup> Again, the Chinese economy will have to take a backseat in favour of stability.

The dominant headlines in the West, that Xi Jinping will be tough on Taiwan, do not reflect the Congress speeches – quite the opposite. Xi stated that “The resolution of the Taiwan issue is a matter for the Chinese themselves to decide [...] We insist on making the utmost effort with the utmost sincerity for the prospect of peaceful reunification, but never commit ourselves to renouncing the use of force and retain the option to take all necessary measures”.<sup>14</sup> A timetable for reunification was not mentioned; it appears that Xi Jinping is aiming at a deliberated solution.<sup>15</sup>

This contrasts with the stance on Hong Kong, which is no longer “ruled by Hong Kong people”, but “by patriots”.<sup>16</sup> The rather moderate stance on Taiwan may be explained by the fact that China’s army lacks operational experience. The objective remains “to build a world-class army”,<sup>17</sup> with the hundredth anniversary of the PLA in 2027 as an important deadline. Further expansion of China’s nuclear and missile arsenal will likely continue. Yet it may be an indication of a certain degree of prudence that Zhang Youxia, a veteran of the Vietnam war – thereby the rare PLA general with battle experience – is still on the Politburo and remains second-in-command on the Military Commission despite his old age (72 – Xi Jinping is thus not the eldest politburo member).

The stance on Taiwan may equally be the result of the reality that China’s economic development still depends on the maintenance of stability on the international scene. Xi Jinping may have reiterated the usual phrasing that “[China] always decides its own position and policy based on the merits of the matter itself”,<sup>18</sup> but he also stated that “upholding the basic norms of international relations”<sup>19</sup> is fundamental. The latter statement may be referring to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a war in which China has so far taken a middle position.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion: Stability**

For now, “stability” appears to be the watchword. Social stability, cross-strait stability, international stability, but above all: stability within the Party. This is the “New Deal” which “General Secretary Xi Jinping”, hailed as “an outstanding figure who arose from

this glorious era, and a people's leader commanding popular confidence"<sup>21</sup> presents to his country and to the world.<sup>22</sup> It is with this China that the EU and the rest of the world will have to find a *modus vivendi*.

Irrespective of Xi Jinping's increasing centralization of power and the shockingly "loyalist" composition of the Standing Committee after the 20<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress, the facts on the ground remain as they were a week ago. China obviously still is a gigantic economic competitor (and certainly does not always play by the rules), and an enormous political challenge (with influence in every country on the globe). But it does not pose a military threat to the EU. Decoupling from China, as some advocate, would increase the security threat, for it would trigger the inexorable logic of geopolitical rivalry. If the EU (and the US) were to decouple from China, or indeed China from them, things would not stop there. Both sides would inevitably seek to court or coerce as many states as possible into joining their "bloc".<sup>23</sup> The EU ought to keep in mind, moreover, that the world may need China to help prevent Russia's war against Ukraine from escalating; but also, that China may need the EU to help manage its issues with the US. On all sides, international stability may yet be feasible and desirable.

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<sup>1</sup> 中苏友好同盟互助条约。

<sup>2</sup> 大跃进。

<sup>3</sup> 改革开放。

<sup>4</sup> (国内国际) 双循环

<sup>5</sup> All further Chinese-language citations are from the 20th CCP Congress as observed by the authors. 中国共产党的中心任务就是[...]以中国式现代化全面推进中华民族伟大复兴。

<sup>6</sup> 实践告诉我们，中国共产党为什么能，中国特色社会主义为什么好，归根到底是马克思主义行，是中国化时代化的马克思主义行。

<sup>7</sup> 适当修改

<sup>8</sup> 党章

<sup>9</sup> 确立习近平党中央的核心、全党的核心地位，确立习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想的指导地位。

<sup>10</sup> 两个确立。

<sup>11</sup> 安全。

<sup>12</sup> 改革。

<sup>13</sup> 我们坚持人民至上、生命至上，坚持动态清零不动摇

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<sup>14</sup> 解决台湾问题是中国人自己的事，要由中国人来决定[...] 我们坚持以最大诚意，尽最大努力，争取和平统一的前景，但绝不承诺放弃使用武力，保留采取一切必要措施的选项

<sup>15</sup> This is also the interpretation of Chao Chun-shan of the Graduate Institute of China Studies at Tamkang University in Taiwan: “It remains unclear whether Xi plans to continue his reign for five years or 10 years, but he is certainly aiming to ‘accomplish some achievements’ on the Taiwan issue as his legacy”. See <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202210220012>. Philip Hsu (徐斯勤), director of National Taiwan University's Center for China Studies stated that “If Xi wants to extend his rule for another 10 years and expects China to continue to rise as a global power, he might not be in a rush to seize Taiwan”. See <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202210180029>.

<sup>16</sup> 爱国者治港.

<sup>17</sup> 建成世界一流军队.

<sup>18</sup> 始终根据事情本身的是非曲直决定自己的立场和政策.

<sup>19</sup> 维护国际关系基本准则.

<sup>20</sup> Sven Biscop, Bart Dessein and Jasper Roctus, [Putin Is Creating the Multipolar World He Thought He Wanted](#). Brussels, Egmont, 7 March 2022.

<sup>21</sup> 总书记习近平是这个伟大时代产生的杰出人物、众望所归的人民领袖.

<sup>22</sup> A new prestigious 5-character name for his thought, to the likes of “Mao Zedong thought” or “Deng Xiaoping theory”, has not been suggested as of now.

<sup>23</sup> Sven Biscop, [Imperial Preference](#). Brussels, Egmont, 11 October 2022.