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By: Russell Hsiao

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Nowhere was the quinquennial gathering of leaders from the most powerful communist party in the world more closely [watched with concern](#) than among the people and leaders of Taiwan. In the wake of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) mid-October 20th National Congress—which witnessed Xi Jinping (習近平) secure his norm-shattering third term as general secretary—tensions in the Taiwan Strait appear set to intensify amid [growing angst](#) within Taiwan about the possibility of a military conflict in the coming years. As policymakers in all capitals search for solutions to manage competition without veering into conflict, it will increasingly behoove them to assess the perceptions of the Taiwanese people and their leaders when considering the conditions for maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This analysis will survey the reactions from Taipei—both from official statements and from polling data—to make a preliminary analysis of what the trendlines are for the future of cross-Strait relations in the near-term after the 20th Party Congress.

The Tsai Administration's Response to the 20th CCP Congress

Despite Beijing's decision to freeze high-level dialogue with Taipei since June 2016, the Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) Administration has made repeated attempts to keep the door open for dialogue and to maintain stable cross-Strait relations. This was demonstrated in the form of multiple pronouncements made by the Taiwanese leader during major policy speeches (see [here](#) and [here](#)), as well as her credible management of increasing tensions caused by the People's Republic of China's (PRC) multifaceted campaign of coercion and military aggression over the past several years. Her [National Day speech](#) this year—delivered on the 111th anniversary of the Wuchang Uprising (武昌起義) that led to the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC)—was no exception. As President Tsai emphasized during the [remarks](#): “Provided there is rationality, equality, and mutual respect, we are willing to work with the Beijing authorities to find a mutually agreeable arrangement for upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. This is our shared

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responsibility.”

Although delivered prior to the release of Xi Jinping’s [work report](#) from the 20th Party Congress, President Tsai’s October 10 National Day speech can be viewed as the point of reference for the Taiwan-relevant portions of the work report. Given the important symbolic value of National Day for cross-Strait ties, the speech has long been used by Taiwanese leaders to convey their positions on cross-Strait relations. The celebration both commemorates the historical events that connect the formation of the ROC government in Taiwan with the Chinese mainland, and marks the continuous existence of that regime.



Image: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (center) and Vice-President William Lai (right) wave to the assembled crowd during National Day ceremonies held on October 10, 2022. (Image source: [Taiwan President’s Office](#))

Despite President Tsai’s repeated overtures to Beijing, much of Xi’s work report was a rehash of statements already made on other occasions. Indeed, much of the report’s language focused on Taiwan was a recapitulation of 2019’s 40th anniversary of the [“Message to Compatriots in Taiwan”](#) (告台灣同胞書)—themes that in turn were re-emphasized in the August release of the [PRC’s White Paper](#) on “The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era” (台灣與新時代中國統一事業).

Leading with the bottom line up front, Xi’s work report emphasizes a point that has been made increasingly clear in recent years: “One Country, Two Systems” (一國兩制) remains Beijing’s baseline and only model for cross-Strait unification. The principles undergirding this model are the [“One-China Principle”](#) (一個中國原則) and the so-called “1992 Consensus” (九二共識). The latter formula, which is presented by the Kuomintang (KMT, 中國國民黨) as the two sides agreeing to different interpretations on the definition of “One-China” (一中各表), perhaps once permitted [“creative ambiguity”](#) in how authorities on both sides interpret the principle—this is despite Beijing

having never explicitly recognizing this fact. Any room for ambiguity all but evaporated in the aftermath of Beijing’s squashing of freedom in Hong Kong, which was ostensibly protected by “One Country, Two Systems.”

While defying Xi’s preconditions for talks, President Tsai led the cross-Strait relations portion of her [National Day speech](#) by stating that “[p]eace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is the basis for the development of cross-Strait relations.” Placing the onus for the deterioration of cross-Strait ties on Beijing, [President Tsai made it clear](#) that it is “the Beijing authorities’ escalation of their military intimidations, diplomatic pressure, trade obstructions, and attempts to erase the sovereignty of the Republic of China (Taiwan) [that] have threatened the status quo of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the region.”

In a direct response to Xi’s work report, Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC, 大陸委員會)—the cabinet-level agency in Taiwan’s central government in charge of cross-Strait policy—put a finer point on Taiwan’s position when it released a [statement](#) on October 16 reading:

“The Republic of China is a sovereign state. Taiwan has never been part of the People’s Republic of China. Taiwanese people will never accept any political endgames unilaterally set by the CCP, be it the ‘1992 Consensus under the ‘one China’ principle’ or ‘one country, two systems’; meanwhile, we believe that only the 23 million people of Taiwan have the right to decide our future.”

While President Tsai’s National Day speech and MAC’s press release do not necessarily signal a new policy position for Taipei, they raise a critical question: what could the Taiwanese people accept, and what type of future do they want?

Public Opinion in Taiwan: A Fledgling “Taiwan Consensus”

A critical factor that ought to be assessed when considering the viability of any policy framework for cross-Strait relations is whether those propositions would be acceptable to the people of Taiwan, as such policies would quickly falter without public support. This illuminates one of the many shortcomings of the “1992 Consensus,” which is its lack of clarity—especially in terms of Beijing’s position—and the inability of leaders in Taiwan to adequately explain the tacit agreement to the voting public. Even KMT Chairman Eric Chu (朱立倫) conceded the difficulty of explaining the formula when he described it as a [“no-consensus consensus.”](#)

To gauge the public response to the policies put forward in the CCP’s work report, the MAC conducted a series of public opinion

surveys. On October 27, MAC released the [results of these polls](#), which were conducted during and immediately after the 20th Party Congress from October 19-23. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the polls indicate overwhelming public disapproval of the Chinese positions. Furthermore, they suggest that a fledgling consensus is forming within Taiwan against the fundamental positions clearly put forward in the CCP's work report.

Around 83.9 percent disapproved of the work report's emphasis on implementing the "[overall strategy for resolving the Taiwan issue](#)" (解決臺灣問題的總體方略), and 85.6 percent expressed disapproval of the statement that the PRC "will never promise to renounce the use of force and take all necessary measures against Taiwan." An even higher percentage (91.6 percent) disapproved of the CCP threatening Taiwan with force by deploying military planes around the island. Other specific findings of the poll were:

- Over 80 percent (82.3) of the respondents disapproved of the CCP's claim that "Taiwan is China's Taiwan. Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, a matter that must be resolved by the Chinese," and that the PRC would adhere to the "1992 Consensus" of the "One-China Principle."
- Nearly eighty percent (79.3) expressed disapproval of the CCP's assertion that "peaceful reunification, one country, two systems" is the best way to achieve cross-Strait "reunification."
- The disapproval towards the CCP's "one country, two systems" arrangement spiked to nearly 90 percent (88.6) when it was defined that it would treat Taiwan as a local government and special administrative region, acquiesce to be ruled by the CCP, and that the Republic of China would no longer exist.
- Finally, 85 percent expressed agreement with the statement that Taiwan's future and cross-Strait relations developments should be decided by Taiwan's 23 million people.

Another important dimension to understand is how Xi's work report has affected Taiwanese perceptions on longer-term issues, including opinions on unification, independence, or maintaining the status quo with Beijing. By comparing the polling conducted in August 2022 with the surveys released in October 2022, the key trendlines in Taiwan citizens' preferences remained largely consistent, with the overwhelming majority (86.3 percent) favoring some form of the status quo (compared to 86.1 percent in August). While there was a slight increase of 1.3 percent in

the proportion of people who [favor independence](#) immediately (now at 7.7 percent)—and a 1.6 percent increase in the number who favor maintaining the status quo and then moving towards independence (now at 22 percent)—the proportion of respondents who favor either maintaining the status quo, and then moving towards unification or immediate unification, also remained steady at around 7 percent and 1.7 percent, respectively.

Conclusion

Despite [President Tsai's call](#) for Beijing "to find a mutually agreeable arrangement for upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," the pathway to a durable cross-Strait peace remains elusive as long as General Secretary Xi continues with his policy of linking "peaceful unification" with "One Country, Two Systems"—and for setting preconditions for cross-Strait talks rigidly based on Taipei's acceptance of Beijing's "One-China Principle" without any clarifications as to its own position on the "1992 Consensus."

As indicated by the recent public opinion poll conducted by the MAC, there is a clear consensus coalescing within Taiwan *against* the foundational positions put forward in the CCP's work report. While opposition to the PRC's policy does not represent an affirmative policy position, public reactions to the CCP's cross-Strait policy under Xi could serve to reinforce a new consensus between Taiwan's major political parties—a trend that has been growing in recent years. As David Brown, a scholar at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, wrote in a 2020 [article for the Global Taiwan Brief](#):

"[T]here is now more convergence of the views and policies of the two main parties toward Beijing than at any time in the past. What has been driving this degree of convergence? Over the past 15 years, both parties have sought to move toward the center in order to better align themselves with majority opinion and win elections. Recently, however, the harder line that General Secretary Xi Jinping has adopted toward both Taiwan and Hong Kong since 2019 has pushed the two parties closer together. In the face of CCP repression, both the DPP and KMT are invested in defending Taiwan's interests."

While Beijing claims that its [cross-Strait policy](#) will "fully accommodate the interests and sentiments of our compatriots in Taiwan," Xi's Taiwan policy clearly reflects a growing disconnect with the people of Taiwan. This could be a cause for serious alarm. As Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu (吳釗燮) recently warned in an interview with Josh Rogin of the [Wash-](#)

ington Post: “[I]f Xi Jinping is so detached from the reality of the situation in Taiwan [...] you can expect his policy toward Taiwan might not be as realistic as we hope.”

With the positions of Beijing clearly staked out, it seems increasingly unlikely for there to be any thaw between now and 2024, or even after that. A victory for the ruling-Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) will in all likelihood continue the current status quo, with the possibility for further escalation by Beijing. However, even if the KMT were to win the 2024 presidential election, it will be impossible for it to either accept “One Country, Two Systems,” or else convince the electorate that any agreements it reaches with Beijing would be honored (especially in light of Hong Kong). As a result, the prospect for a significant reduction of cross-Strait tension is unlikely, even post-2024.

In particular, Xi’s linking of “peaceful unification” through “One Country, Two Systems” and the core tenets of the “One-China Principle” with the so-called “1992 Consensus” are critical missteps by Beijing. This approach essentially ties the hand of the Kuomintang—which has long endorsed the “1992 Consensus”—to the “One Country, Two Systems” by associating the two concepts. It is also a warning to the leaders of the opposition party to not stray far from Beijing’s line as Taiwan gears up for the 2024 general elections.

Nevertheless, if supporters of both major parties—and the independent parties—within Taiwan can come to an affirmative consensus on a unified position on Taiwan’s relations with China, it could demonstrate to Beijing that it needs to negotiate in good faith with the democratically elected leader of Taiwan, regardless of their party affiliation. This would make a fair and durable peace more likely. Taiwan appears to be on that path. As [President Tsai stated](#) in her National Day speech: “The broadest consensus among the Taiwanese people and our various political parties is that we must defend our national sovereignty and our free and democratic way of life. On this point, we have no room for compromise.”

The main point: In the wake of the CCP’s 20th Party Congress, it is more important than ever to understand the opinions of Taiwan’s people. As recent polling has shown, China’s messaging appears to be contributing to a new Taiwanese consensus on cross-Strait policy.

Military Implications of the CCP 20th Party Congress for Xi’s Taiwan Policy

By: Eric Chan

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With the conclusion of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) 20th Party Congress on October 22, many observers of political developments in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are coming to a similar set of conclusions regarding the future direction of the CCP. These changes were [surprisingly extensive](#) in nature, breaking multiple, long-held party norms.

The changes from this Party Congress, as well as the broader party membership’s muted response, have a number of implications for the armed wing of the party, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In this article, I look at both Xi’s [“Work Report to the 20th Party Congress,”](#) along with the subsequent actions from the Party Congress, to assess these military implications and what they might mean for Taiwan and the United States.

The Political Factors Driving Changes to the PLA

First and foremost, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平) has successfully dismantled Deng Xiaoping’s (鄧小平) framework of collective leadership, as well as the informal party factions that formerly operated under the institutional surface. This is demonstrated most vividly by personnel changes in the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC, 中央政治局常委會). The PBSC was the designated institution for the party to exercise collective supreme power under the principle of “democratic centralism” (民主集中). Previously, the seven members of the PBSC were consultatively selected, with the party general secretary acting as first among equals. Now, the PBSC has been packed with Xi loyalists, and relatively powerless loyalists at that. Age-wise, none of the members [are in a credible position](#) to be Xi’s successor. For that matter, most of them are [unlikely to remain](#) beyond the next Party Congress in 2027.

Xi’s reach has gone beyond the PBSC, to the level of the broader Politburo (中央政治局). The Politburo is the second-rank, 24-member institution that has traditionally served to identify and groom future decision-makers for ascension to the PBSC. In this case, Xi has micromanaged down to eliminate potential future challengers such as Hu Chunhua (胡春華). In doing so, Xi has shown that he can exercise the full powers of a “core lead-

er” (領導核心) to override party norms; this was a title that he [picked up in 2015](#), but [without the powers](#) that he has demonstrated as of late.

Second, [statist economic policy](#) has returned in full force. This does not just mean an increase in state industrial policy, but also the elevation of national security objectives (for instance, breaking party-identified energy and technology “[strangleholds](#)”) and the prioritization of political/ideological objectives (e.g., zero-COVID policies) over pure economic growth.

Third, national security has been broadly redefined as “[multi-dimensional](#)” in conception. This is meant to propagate Xi’s belief in the connection between domestic control, party security, and external challenges (primarily the ideological competition with the United States). It is also meant to underline the perceived necessity of greater core control over the PLA.

Personnel as Policy

The first and most important implication for the military is that at the strategic level, decision-making will likely be more rapid, with fewer checks and balances. As mentioned, the PBSC has been transformed from an oligarchical and collective decision-making forum to an executor of Xi’s will. In military parlance, the “Observe, Orient, Decide, Act” (OODA) loop has been shortened due to personnel changes at the PBSC and also at the Central Military Commission (CMC, 中央軍事委員會). As the other PBSC members are both ideologically and factionally aligned with Xi—and do not have significant political power bases of their own—it is unlikely they would either desire to oppose (or have the power to oppose) any decision made by Xi. Thus, Xi will likely find it easier to take risky actions given the lack of serious intra-party political opposition.

Barring PBSC opposition, the next limiting factor to a Taiwan invasion would be the CMC’s combined assessment of PLA capability against its existing war plans. Here, too, Xi has made a number of revealing, norm-breaking changes to the structure of the CMC. First, General He Weidong (何衛東) was catapulted to the CMC second vice chairman position, despite not being a prior CMC member. General He was the [commander of the Eastern Theater Command](#) (東部戰區), which oversees most PLA activity against Taiwan. This indicates that [operational experience running a joint command](#) and political ties with Xi were likely instrumental causes of this meteoric rise. Second, General Zhang Youxia (張又俠) was retained as the CMC first vice chairman, despite exceeding the unofficial retirement age of 68—likely for the sake of continuity, as well as for his [combat](#)

[experience](#).

Thus, it is clear that Xi prioritized several things in his personnel shifts at the CMC. First, personal, familial, and political ties to Xi himself; and second, a continued focus on combat experience. The first priority is meant to secure high-level military support throughout a predicted period of heightened internal tension (such as the continuation of an anti-corruption crackdown) as well as external tension (Taiwan, and competition with the United States). Xi’s work report repeatedly emphasizes the need to “enhance political loyalty to the military” above the tasks that would also be expected for a national military: “strengthen the military through reform,” “boost combat preparedness,” and “enhance our military capabilities.”

However, it will likely also mean increased deference throughout the ranks to political demands, just as “wolf warrior diplomacy” in the PRC diplomatic corps has remained in vogue, despite [seasoned diplomats knowing full well](#) that such actions have backfired with respect to the PRC’s global image. Thus, there is a significant risk that the “best military advice” provided by the PLA to a CMC dominated by Xi loyalists, and headed by Xi himself as the chairman (中央軍事委員會主席), will increasingly be twisted to what Xi wants to hear.



Image: PLA General Zhang Youxia speaking at China’s National Defense University in December 2021. (Image source: [CCTV](#))

Ghosts of the Sino-Vietnam War

The second priority for Xi’s appointments to the CMC—combat experience—implies that Xi believes that the PLA is at a critical disadvantage versus potential adversaries due to its untested state. Moreover, Xi is well known to be [fixated on history](#). Accordingly, in his work report, one of his highlighted priorities is to “encourage military personnel to learn more about the history of the military,” with the ostensible goal of improving military understanding of party theory. Elevation of combat-tested generals should be viewed as an extension of this political demand

for greater military deference to the party.

As mentioned, General Zhang had combat experience in the Sino-Vietnam War of 1979, as well as a 1984 border clash (the Battle of Laoshan [老山戰役]). Another new member of the CMC, General Liu Zhenli (劉振立), [has combat experience as a company commander](#) from a 1986 border clash. Notably, General Liu is taking the position of the chief of the Joint Staff Department, replacing General Li Zuocheng (李作成), who led a company in the 1979 war. With the exception of General He, the other members of the CMC without combat experience hold support roles: Li Shangfu (李尚福), minister of national defense (a largely ceremonial role for PLA international engagement); Miao Hua (苗華), head of political work; and Zhang Shenmin (張昇民), head of discipline and inspection.

Given Generals Zhang and Liu's respective positions and ability to drive the rest of the CMC, this indicates that lessons of the Sino-Vietnam War and the later border clashes will continue to weigh heavily on PLA modernization priorities. As a result, the second implication is that at the operational level, the PLA will likely re-double its historical focus on the Sino-Vietnam War for lessons learned, and view the Russia-Ukraine War through that lens.

This is particularly likely given the numerous parallels between the PLA's performance in Vietnam and the Russian military's current performance in Ukraine. For instance, the PLA was under significant political pressure to rapidly conclude the war to minimize the chances of Soviet intervention. Combined with an optimistic military leadership belief that [the PLA would easily seize Vietnam's northern provincial capitals and destroy the regular Vietnamese army](#), PLA staff developed an [overly complex war plan](#). With a badly inadequate logistics system, this rapidly led to ammunition shortages among the 200,000-man invasion force just days into the fighting. Finally, a combination of ineffective tactics and the aforementioned logistics issues led to [mutinously poor morale and low initiative](#). While the PLA ended up capturing the targeted provincial capitals, they did so far past their timeline, and at high cost. Moreover, most of the casualties on the Vietnamese side were sustained by militia and second-line forces, with the regular army largely untouched at the end of war. The war was a traumatic experience for young PLA officers, with the PLA sustaining tens of thousands of deaths in a month of combat. Thus, Xi's elevation of more general officers with Sino-Vietnam War and border clash experience will inevitably lead to analyses of modern war being viewed through those personal and historical lenses.

However, this should not be taken to mean that this will result in a more war-skeptical party. While the war was an institutional embarrassment for the PLA due to the numerous operational failures, the party nevertheless viewed it as a strategic success in driving a wedge between the Soviet Union and Vietnam, while deterring the Vietnamese. Meanwhile, the war was personally successful for its architect, Deng Xiaoping, who leveraged the results to consolidate his power in the party and ensure his mastery over the humbled PLA leadership—a historical lesson that is not likely to be lost on Xi.

Conclusion

The end of the 20th Party Congress has ushered in a new era of control for Xi Jinping. Intra-party checks and balances to Xi's power, both formal and informal, have been demolished. This has resulted in a party that is not only more malleable to Xi's will, but also a party cadre that will seek to curry favor with the leader. This has significant implications for the PLA and its ability to provide unvarnished military expertise. Moreover, Xi's fixation on history and reliance on the few military leaders with combat experience will mean that the Sino-Vietnam War will play an even larger role in PLA development. This has secondary implications for a potential Taiwan invasion. The PLA build-up for an invasion will certainly be exhaustive and telegraphed well in advance. This will include [significant psychological and logistical preparation](#), as well as early mobilization of both people and the economy. This reduces the chance of a "bolt from the blue" surprise attack, but the PLA will likely be better prepared for the possibility of a long, grinding war of attrition.

The main point: The 20th Party Congress has resulted in solidified political control for Xi Jinping. Militarily, this will mean that strategic-level decision-making will become more rapid, at the cost of a higher risk of miscalculation. Operationally, the PLA leadership will likely be even more fixated on the lessons of the Sino-Vietnam War as a model for PLA modernization and preparation for a potential invasion of Taiwan.

Growing Uncertainty in the Taiwan Strait: PRC's Taiwan Policy after the CCP's 20th Party Congress

By: Arthur Ding

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its [20th Party Congress](#) at the Great Hall of the People from October 16 to 22, and the new leadership line-up has been unveiled.

As expected, Xi Jinping (習近平) has secured a third term as both the CCP's general secretary and as chairman of China's highest military organ, the Central Military Commission (CMC, 中央軍事委員會). What was less expected was the fact that so many of [Xi's protégés were promoted](#) into the highest party organ, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC, 中央政治局常務委員會), leaving potential competitors from other factions all but eliminated. There should now be no doubt that Xi's Politburo supporters will also be appointed to the senior positions in state organizations at the coming 14th National People's Congress (NPC, 全國人民代表大會), scheduled for early March 2023.

With the dust mostly settled from the senior party personnel appointments, the focus must now shift to a consideration of CCP policy in different dimensions. Among them is Xi's Taiwan policy: what is the weight of Taiwan policy *vis-à-vis* other competing policy concerns? What actions will Xi take to accomplish his long-held goal of "reunification"? And, following from this, has Xi altered the timelines for potentially launching military operations against Taiwan? These are all important questions to be addressed in this analysis.

Policy Announcements

Analysts need to watch what was said by Xi on Taiwan policy. Generally speaking, Xi's tone on Taiwan policy in the [work report](#) from the 20th Party Congress was not unusually hawkish, though there is a threatening and firm message. In the work report, Xi does not mention specific policy approaches or provide a timeline for specific actions. Instead, he focuses on principles. These include: "Peaceful Re-unification and One Country Two Systems" (和平統一, 一國兩制); upholding the "One-China Principle and the 1992 Consensus" (一個中國原則和“九二共識”); and firmly opposing "Taiwan independence" (台獨) and promoting "reunification" (促統).

To be clear, those principles and statements are consistent with

what have been included in work reports from previous party congresses. Nevertheless, there are several more aggressive [statements](#) worthy of considered attention. In particular, Xi stated that China needs to maintain its "[dominance and initiative](#)" (主導權和主動權) over Taiwan policy. Xi does not elaborate on this point, but it suggests an active posture in pressing for People's Republic of China (PRC) goals. Furthermore, Xi did not renounce the use of force, and argued for keeping all necessary measures open to protect against "interference by outside forces" (外部勢力干涉) and "separatists" (分裂分子) seeking Taiwan independence.

By committing not to renounce the use of force, there is no doubt that Xi intends to send a threatening message and signal his determination. For the past two decades, China has largely avoided such openly threatening statements toward Taiwan, with the hope that growing exchanges in all dimensions between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait could increase Taiwanese affinity for China—and ultimately, lead to peaceful reunification. It is very obvious that this strategy has fallen apart—in fact, the opposite has been true—and this may partially explain the increasingly threatening tone.

Notably, this is probably the first time that a work report has explicitly mentioned "interference by outside forces." There is no doubt that the United States is the target of this phrase, because in the past several years, interaction between the United States and Taiwan has steadily grown and there is growing support in the United States for helping defend Taiwan. China is worried that the United States' "One-China Policy" (一個中國政策) will be hollowed out.

Xi also added more words on Taiwan policy to the [CCP Constitution](#) (中國共產黨章程). The wording is: "precisely and resolutely in a comprehensive manner carry out the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle, adamantly oppose and contain 'independence.'" By contrast, the [2017 version](#) had only said "... Continuously strengthen the solidarity of the whole people [...] including Taiwan compatriots [...] to complete reunification with the mother land."

It is fair to say that adding more words to the Party's constitution demonstrates Xi's growing seriousness on the Taiwan issue, though it is hard to assess the potential policy impact. Additionally, the new language is largely consistent with policy statements made over the past several decades, so adding them is probably intended to remind party cadres of the holy mission of the "reunification" issue.

In general, the content of the work report and the addition of

new language in the constitution demonstrate two dialectical features. On one hand, Xi is attempting to evince a moderate appearance by advocating for “peaceful reunification” and the “One Country, Two Systems” (一國兩制) framework. (This, despite the fact that these principles have [lost their attractiveness to Taiwanese](#) due to Xi’s heavy-handed approach to the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests in 2019, and the unprecedented state control over society as imposed in China over the past decade.)

On the other hand, Xi is sending a threatening message to Taiwanese and the United States by not renouncing the use of force. This indicates that in order to facilitate “reunification,” China is likely to actively work to create an environment conducive to doing so—which could potentially include the use of military force.

The “New Normal” of Military Activity in the Taiwan Strait

In the wake of the PRC’s August military drills around Taiwan, the threat of a so-called “[new normal](#)” has become a widely discussed problem in the Taiwan Strait, with profound implications for the regional order. The phrase “new normal” refers to the fact that the Chinese military has incrementally increased pressure against Taiwan by dispatching military aircraft and ships in the areas close to Taiwan, a behavior that has become routine. This approach has multiple goals: it is intended to send a warning signal to Taiwan independence supporters and to drive a wedge in Taiwan society, while simultaneously testing the Taiwan military’s overall readiness and seeking to exhaust its forces. Furthermore, there is very little that the United States can do to assist Taiwan in repelling Chinese military encroachments and reversing this “new normal,” thereby indirectly discrediting the United States.

A typical case is Chinese jet fighters’ frequent [incursions across the “median line”](#) in the Taiwan Strait. The median line was unilaterally imposed by the United States in the 1950s; although Beijing never explicitly endorsed the arrangement, it had previously been [observed by both sides of the Taiwan Strait](#) as a de facto demarcation line in order to maintain stability and peace. Nevertheless, as China has built more oceangoing warships and coast guard vessels with increased capabilities, the temptation of overruling the median line has been increasing. Beginning in 2013, China’s bombers started to fly from east of Taiwan toward the west Pacific; and beginning in 2019, China’s fighters started to [fly across the median line with growing frequency](#) (see also [here](#) and [here](#)).

China’s incursions increased significantly immediately after US

House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan](#). China launched [large-scale military exercises](#) in six designated zones close to Taiwan’s sovereign waters. Notably, these zones effectively encircled the island. During the military exercises, the Chinese military launched ballistic missiles over Taiwan and mobilized fighters and warships, some of which entered into Taiwan’s sovereign territory.

Beginning in 2022, Beijing has [advanced the argument](#) that the waters between the southeast coast of China and Taiwan are Chinese territorial waters. Citing the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) (UNCLOS), China has contended that it has sovereignty, sovereign rights, and management rights in the whole of the Taiwan Strait. (It should be noted that Beijing has deliberately blurred the line between management rights and sovereignty.) China’s interpretation implies its ambition of “internalizing” the Taiwan Strait, though Beijing has never publicly used the term.

Internalizing the Taiwan Strait could help Beijing accomplish its desired dominance over Taiwan. By invoking the “One-China Principle” and the aforementioned interpretation of the Taiwan Strait, China has increasingly argued that its military assets can cross the Taiwan Strait at any time without breaching relevant international laws governing borders.

Internalization could mean the full control of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and the ability to claim sole sovereignty over the Taiwan Strait. It may also imply a desire to enforce Chinese maritime claims over the whole Taiwan Strait, thus denying foreign warships—especially those of the US Navy—any right to conduct future freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS). Under this circumstance, dominance could be achieved while China could take whatever action it deems fit in the Taiwan Strait, at any time.

Conclusions

Needless to say, Beijing’s attempts to redefine the terms in the Taiwan Strait will invite reactions from Taiwan—and likely the United States, as well. There is a growing discussion in Taiwan over pushing back against China’s salami-slicing approach, so that the “new normal” created by China cannot be sustained. This discussion has included [changing the rules of engagement](#) for the Taiwanese military. However, there is no doubt that any push-back increases the risk of conflict breaking out between the Taiwanese and Chinese militaries.

For its part, the United States is unlikely to sit idle. On one hand, China’s salami-slicing tactics in the Taiwan Strait may be regard-

ed as a threat to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific per the terms of the [Taiwan Relations Act](#) (TRA). According to the TRA, the United States is bound to resist “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes,” and to regard these as “a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.” Should the United States fail to respond to China’s actions, it could risk undermining its credibility in the region.

On the other hand, the United States also needs to take a stance on China’s dubious legal claims over the Taiwan Strait. Executing FONOPs in the Taiwan Strait will continue to anger Beijing, and cause further friction and conflict between the United States and China. However, as in the South China Sea, the United States is likely to continue to execute FONOPs in the Taiwan Strait so as to refute China’s claim of exclusive sovereignty—and to maintain the “rules-based order,” a cause that the United States [has advocated for under the Biden Administration](#).

The Taiwan Strait is entering another period of great uncertainty. Xi has adopted a salami-slicing approach in the past several years to create a “new normal,” and both Taiwan and the United States have been forced to take steps to push back. How Xi will take advantage of this “new normal” in the future remains unknown. Nevertheless, in the context of push and push-back, it seems inevitable that the “new normal” will take on an increasingly militarized form—despite the fact that the “new normal” may imply no rush for Xi to launch a full-blown invasion in the near future.

The main point: In the wake of the 20th Party Congress, it seems clear that the CCP under Xi Jinping intends to take a harder line on Taiwan issues in the coming years. In response, Taiwan and the United States will likely be forced to rethink their approaches to the Taiwan Strait.

Developments at the 20th Party Congress Portend “High Winds and Perilous Waves” for the CCP—and for Taiwan—in the Years Ahead

By: John Dotson

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The Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) 20th Party Congress, held

from October 16-22 in Beijing, is likely to go down in history as the watershed moment that saw the complete abandonment of the norms of collective elite leadership established by the party in the 1990s, and which fixed in place the one-man rule of Xi Jinping (習近平) as the “[core of the party center](#)” (為核心的黨中央). On its own, this would be worrisome enough, as Xi’s assertive and nationalist temper have been fully on display—in an escalating manner, from “[wolf warrior](#)” diplomacy to the [August 2022 military exercises around Taiwan](#)—since his ascension to power in 2012. However, narrative themes both preceding and unveiled during the party congress further reinforce the increasing rigidity and bellicosity of the CCP, particularly as it pertains to policy towards Taiwan. Observers of political developments in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) should take seriously these signs of an increasingly aggressive posture by Beijing—one that is likely to grow even more assertive now that Xi has secured a third term as CCP general secretary, and either eliminated or sidelined any significant domestic opposition.

Xi’s Speech Before the Party Congress

The CCP has signaled a more assertive stance towards Taiwan throughout 2022—in measures ranging from [military flights across the Taiwan Strait centerline](#) to China’s provocative military exercises around the island. The CCP’s 20th Party Congress showed no signs of relaxing either the rhetorical or actual pressure that Beijing continues to direct against Taiwan—and several aspects of the narrative messaging surrounding the event suggest that this pressure is likely to only increase in the future.

As is customary for a party congress (and as is now *de rigueur* for any significant CCP gathering), Xi—in his role as party general secretary—delivered the keynote address to the assembled body, in the form of an [official “work report.”](#) Under the title of “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Unite and Struggle for the Comprehensive Construction of a Modern Socialist Country” (高舉中國特色社會主義偉大旗幟為全面建設社會主義現代化國家而團結奮鬥), the speech contained little that was substantively new, although it did drive home with repeated urgency themes contained in Xi’s previous public statements and recent authoritative CCP documents.

“High Winds and Perilous Waves” in Xi’s Speech

Xi’s address was predictably positive about the party’s achievements during his tenure, but the speech was also noteworthy for its predictions of troubled times ahead for China and the CCP. The word “struggle” (奮鬥), which has a long history in CCP discourse—including Xi Jinping’s own emphasis on the “[concept](#)

of struggle” (奮鬥觀)—was used 27 times in the text of the speech, in addition to its inclusion in the title. Xi cautioned party members regarding the need to safeguard stability, and to keep on guard against “black swans” (黑天鵝) and “gray rhinos” (灰犀牛) (i.e., [unexpected dangers, and known dangers that are left unaddressed](#)). Perhaps most strikingly of all, Xi called upon party members to “prepare for the major test of undergoing high winds and perilous waves” (準備經受風高浪急甚至驚濤駭浪的重大考驗) in the years to come. Such statements could perhaps be written off as the sort of hyperbole that has long been featured in CCP discourse. However, in conjunction with Xi’s personnel appointments and other developments from earlier this year, they portend an even more confrontational course for China in the future.

Discussion of Taiwan in Xi’s Speech

In the [official Chinese-language transcript](#) of Xi’s speech, Taiwan is mentioned 17 times. This includes four mentions of opposing “Taiwan independence” (台獨), sometimes described as associated with “a small number of ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist elements” (極少數“台獨”分裂分子); four mentions of opposing “interference by foreign forces” (外部勢力干涉) in relation to Taiwan; and two mentions of the [“Party’s Comprehensive Plan for Resolving the Taiwan Problem in the New Era”](#) (新時代黨解決台灣問題總體方略), a vague set of guidelines first unveiled in late 2021. Xi’s extensive comments about Taiwan, which repeatedly asserted the PRC’s resolve to achieve unification while lambasting alleged US interference, included [these statements](#):

“In response to separatist activities aimed at ‘Taiwan independence’ and gross provocations of external interference in Taiwan affairs, we have resolutely fought against separatism and countered interference, demonstrating our resolve and ability to safeguard China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and to oppose ‘Taiwan independence.’ [...] 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; it is by no means targeted at our Taiwan compatriots.”

Amendments to the Party Constitution

The redoubled assertions regarding PRC sovereignty over Taiwan were further codified in [amendments to the CCP party constitution](#) (黨章程)—arguably, a far more significant document than the PRC state constitution—which added language to assert that the party would “resolutely oppose and restrain ‘Taiwan independence’” (堅決反對和遏制“台獨”). In tandem with this, language was added to further assert the party’s rigid adherence to the “One Country, Two Systems” (一個國家, 兩種制度) framework for unification. Specifically, the added text averred that the party would “comprehensively, exactly, and unswervingly implement” (全面准确, 坚定不移贯彻) this formula, in order to “complete the great enterprise of unification of the ancestral nation” (完成祖國統一大業).

Xi’s speech and the amended language to the party constitution were largely consistent with previous CCP messaging, and did not present either specific threats or a timetable for “reunification.” However, they did strengthen previous statements, and appeared to further elevate the importance of Taiwan as a policy priority. Furthermore, they follow in the wake of other, more assertive official statements on Taiwan made over the past twelve months: in particular, the [resolution on party history](#) issued in November 2021, as well as a [revised white paper on Taiwan policy](#) that was released in the immediate wake of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022. (The latter was particularly ominous in the way it praised Hong Kong as a successful example of “One Country, Two Systems” in action, and as a model for Taiwan.) Taken together, these documents represent a clear attempt by the CCP leadership under Xi to more forcefully assert an unyielding stance on Taiwan.

Personnel Appointments at the 20th Party Congress

Such narrative messaging was bolstered by the clean sweep that Xi made in filling the ranks of the CCP’s senior-most bureaucratic bodies with officials personally loyal to him. This included a purging of senior officials connected with former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao’s (胡錦濤) Communist Youth League faction (團派, *Tuanpai*). Prior to the congress, some media forecasters had predicted that Hu’s protégés Wang Yang (汪洋) and Hu Chunhua (胡春華) were both candidates for promotion to state premier (see here and here). However, both men were [ejected from the Politburo](#), alongside fellow Hu protégé Premier Li Keqiang (李克強). This has resulted in the apparent wipe-out of Hu’s *Tuanpai* patronage network, whose members had appeared to be relatively pragmatic on Taiwan in relation to the more assertive and ideological posture taken by Xi and his sup-

porters. (For more on this latter point, see discussion of the [promotion of Wang Huning](#), and its implications for Taiwan policy, in our previous issue.)

This has been accompanied by the leapfrog elevation into the party's top ranks of security officials aligned with and loyal to Xi. In fact, some commentators have even gone so far as to describe Xi's latest round of appointments as representing a "[war cabinet](#)" formed in the expectation of conflict. Chen Wenqing (陳文清), who since 2016 has served as the director of the Ministry of State Security (國家安全部), has been [appointed to the Politburo and to the position of party secretary of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission](#) (中央政法委員會), which will place him in a supervisory role over the PRC's intelligence and domestic security bureaucracies. On the military side, two other Xi loyalists, General He Weidong (何衛東) and General Zhang Youxia (張又俠), have been appointed and retained, respectively, for vice-chairman positions on the CCP Central Military Commission (中央軍事委員會). (For a more detailed discussion of the significance of these and other military appointments, see "Military Implications of the CCP 20th Party Congress for Xi's Taiwan Policy" by Eric Chan, elsewhere in this issue.)

Furthermore, as [indicated by Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu](#) (吳釗燮), this latest round of personnel reshuffling has seen the demotion of PRC officials with long-standing experience on Taiwan policy, in favor of Xi loyalists. This sidelining of "Taiwan hands" has been accompanied by concurrent [promotions of ideological loyalists to the united front bureaucracy](#). The resulting policy echo chamber will likely further isolate Xi and other top leaders from information and advice that conflicts with their existing assumptions, reinforcing a potentially dangerous environment of groupthink at the uppermost echelons of the CCP.

Conclusion

The developments of the 20th Party Congress bear ominous implications for Taiwan. While there were no major new announcements related to Taiwan, and the messages conveyed were largely consistent with previous statements on Taiwan policy, both the steadily hardening tone of CCP narratives and the nature of Xi's personnel appointments augur ill for the future of cross-strait relations. CCP policy-making in the wake of the 20th Party Congress increasingly looks to be a one-man show, with the senior organs of the CCP operating less as venues for policy formulation and consultation, and more as institutional tools for implementing the decisions of the "core" leader of the party. The outcomes of the party congress are but the latest

sign of Beijing's increasingly rigid policy orientation towards Taiwan—one that threatens "high winds and perilous waves" for the island and its people in the years ahead.

The main point: Both the narrative themes and personnel appointments unveiled during the CCP's 20th Party Congress reinforce the increasing rigidity and bellicosity of the party leadership, particularly as it pertains to policy towards Taiwan. Observers of political developments in the PRC should take seriously these signs of an increasingly aggressive posture on the part of Beijing.

An Assessment of the 20th CCP Congress for US Policy towards Taiwan

By: Michael Mazza

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Viewed in isolation, Xi Jinping's (習近平) [report](#) to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) might not raise significant concerns about cross-strait relations. The report's language about Taiwan echoes that of past work reports—it emphasizes the preferability of "peaceful reunification," reserves the right to use force if necessary, and avoids indicating a timeline for "resolving the Taiwan question." It would be a mistake, however, to read the Congress Report in isolation. For a fuller appreciation of implications for Taiwan—and thus for American Taiwan policy—analysts should consider changes in tone and emphasis from the [19th Party Congress work report](#), and should consider the context in which the Party Congress took place.

Looking Back

As is customary, Xi began both reports with an overview of the five years since the last Congress and an assessment of where things stood at the time of delivery. Those overviews tell us much about Xi's priorities and preoccupations. In 2017, Xi called attention to "profound and complex changes" in China and the world, specifically "sluggish global economic recovery, frequent outbreaks of regional conflicts and disturbances, and intensifying global issues" and "a new normal in economic development" at home. Despite those challenges, Xi painted a rosy picture of the CCP's accomplishments over the preceding five years. Only after describing advances in "economic devel-

opment,” “deepening reform,” “developing democracy and the rule of law,” “theoretical and cultural fronts,” “improving living standards,” and “building an ecological civilization” does Xi mention strengthening the military, Taiwan, and diplomacy.

In 2022, Xi has provided a similar, though not identical bulleted list. Military modernization and the implementation of “One Country, Two Systems” (一國兩制), including for Taiwan, still fall near the bottom of that list, but the list now includes a new item—“we have applied a holistic approach to national security”—and it follows introductory remarks that are much darker in tenor. Whereas in 2017 China faced “profound and complex changes,” in the years since then Beijing has grappled with “grave, intricate international developments and a series of immense risks and challenges.” The CCP has, as a result, “worked with firm resolve to safeguard national security”—a phrase that only appears about two-thirds of the way through the 2017 report.

In his introductory remarks this year, Xi also emphasized his success in responding to “turbulent developments in Hong Kong” and highlighted “separatist activities aimed at ‘Taiwan independence’ and gross provocations of external interference in Taiwan affairs.” The 2017 report only makes oblique reference to “external interference.” Now, however, Beijing is “confronted with drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China,” concerns which are entirely absent from the 2017 report.

In Xi’s telling, in 2022 China is surrounded, isolated, and targeted with coercion. It is stalked by enemies, both foreign and domestic. It is prepared to fight and will “never yield.” Circumstances were not nearly so dire at the last Party Congress in 2017. Now, however, Xi paints a picture of China as cornered tiger, ready to thrash its way out of encirclement.

Deprioritizing Economic Development

The report to the 20th Party Congress maintains the big-picture economic goal that was present in the previous report—essentially, greater prosperity for all Chinese by 2035. But there are reasons to wonder if Xi Jinping has deprioritized economic advancement. As noted, the top three achievements in 2017 were: “major achievements in economic development,” “major breakthroughs in deepening reform,” and “major steps in developing democracy and the rule of law.” In last month’s work report, however, the top three achievements of the preceding five years were as follows:

- “We have established the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (better known as “Xi Jinping Thought”);
- “We have strengthened Party leadership in all respects”;
- “We have developed well-conceived and complete strategic plans for advancing the cause of the Party and the country in the new era.”

Xi, then, has been primarily concerned with solidifying the CCP’s leadership of the country and with solidifying his leadership of the CCP. That economic development has been only a second-order priority is clear from his list of achievements. Xi stated that “We have achieved moderate prosperity, the millennia-old dream of the Chinese nation, through persistent hard work.” This could be a headline triumph, but it is instead relegated to fourth position.

Having successfully invested in the party’s control (and in his control of the party), Xi could turn to economic growth in the half-decade until the next Party Congress. But the work report, even given the discussions of economic issues, does not point to such a future. The emphasis on self-reliance in science and technology is defensive in nature. That is, it is not intended to reinvigorate growth, but instead to avoid the worst outcomes of China’s disentanglement from global supply chains, a process that is underway due both to Beijing’s own choices and to Western—and especially American—efforts to limit China’s access to technologies the country uses to aggrandize its own military power, and that enable its worst human rights abuses.

Even absent technology access questions, China is facing economic headwinds that may be difficult to surmount as it continues to eschew market-based approaches. As Derek Scissors argued last year, “the PRC faces an unprecedented aging challenge that will sharply intensify late this decade, has serious debt problems, and prefers wealth-killing approaches to innovation and rural land.” Those challenges all predate the global pandemic, zero-COVID, the war in Ukraine, and global inflationary pressures.

Indeed, Xi’s stubborn adherence to his “zero-COVID” approach—when other, less damaging options are available—makes clear that economic development is not a priority for Xi. Again, this is evident in the work report itself. Consider comparative mentions—a crude but illustrative measure—of “economy” or “economic” versus “security” in the document. The former appears 65 times in the 2022 report, compared to 80 for the latter. This reverses the ratio present in the 2017 report (71 mentions of

“economy” or “economic,” versus 43 mentions of “security”).

Whether this shift is because Xi fears he cannot deliver on economic promises or because he really does see enemies around every corner, it should be concerning for Taiwan. “Security” does not provide many obvious tangible deliverables to work towards for future party congresses. Xi has already claimed his policies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang as great successes. The party may welcome ever more far-reaching domestic repression, but that is presumably not something to brag openly about in search of political legitimacy. Making progress on Taiwan, however that might be defined, may become more important as a result of the new emphasis on “security.”

Making Progress on Taiwan

Reassuringly, the report was ambiguous about how Beijing defines progress in “resolving the Taiwan question.” Xi promised the party would “unswervingly advance the cause of national reunification,” but he did not specify what that would look like. Dire conclusions, then, about a near-term threat to Taiwan are not supported.

Even so, happy days are not here to stay. Xi’s repeated gloating about his successes in Hong Kong, even as he insists on applying “One Country, Two Systems” to the Taiwan Strait, is revelatory. It demonstrates once again that Xi has little interest in winning hearts and minds in Taiwan or in convincing Taiwan’s people that unification can make their lives better. He promises instead the smothering rule of the CCP. At the Congress, the party [enshrined that promise in its constitution](#) by approving amendments on “fully, faithfully, and resolutely implementing the policy of One Country, Two Systems” and on “resolutely opposing and deterring separatists seeking ‘Taiwan independence.’”

Meanwhile, promises to engage in wide-ranging cross-Strait consultations are deceptively diplomatic. In truth, Xi aims to stoke divisions in Taiwanese society. His offers of discussions are predicated on acceptance of the so-called “1992 Consensus” (九二共識), which Taiwan’s ruling party rejects. Beijing aims to sideline Taiwan’s elected leaders and the people that voted for them, creating the conditions for domestic tensions and fractious politics.

It is clear that the velvet glove approach—even if it was only concealing an iron gauntlet—is a thing of the past. Theories abound about Hu Jintao’s (胡錦濤) removal from the Party Congress, but if it was premeditated, it is worth remembering that it was on Hu’s watch that China last adopted relatively softer tactics *vis-à-vis* Taiwan. Even if only symbolically, Hu’s eviction

from the Great Hall of the People put the final nail in the coffin of cross-Strait détente.

Implications for the United States

There were no earth-shattering developments pertaining to Taiwan during the latest Party Congress. It is clear that Xi Jinping will continue to emphasize sticks over carrots in his cross-Strait policy. The work report—in particular its prioritization of security over the economy—supports the argument that the PRC threat to Taiwan is growing more urgent, but is not yet imminent.

To maintain peace and stability in Asia, the United States should match that advancing threat with some urgency of its own. In the coming years, the primary task for Taiwan will be to counter PRC coercion and to render that coercion ineffectual. Washington can support Taiwan in doing so. Via the provision of arms, investments in its own armed forces, and ramped up bilateral training, the United States can slow the growth of—and perhaps even erode—China’s emerging military advantages in the Taiwan Strait. By putting forth and vigorously implementing an ambitious bilateral trade agenda—including reciprocal market access—the United States can reduce Taiwan’s reliance on the Chinese economy and thus its susceptibility to Chinese economic warfare. By using its diplomatic heft to support Taiwan’s participation in international organizations and to buttress third countries’ [deepening ties with Taipei](#), the United States can reduce Taiwan’s international isolation in ways that limit the effectiveness of Chinese bullying.

Importantly, China’s shifts—from prioritizing economic development to prioritizing security, and from prioritizing carrots in the Taiwan Strait to prioritizing sticks—necessitate a parallel shift in Washington’s own Taiwan Strait policy. In particular, the United States should continue rebalancing its approach to emphasize deterrence rather than reassurance *vis-à-vis* Beijing. Washington should avoid precipitous action, like seeking to establish formal diplomatic ties with Taipei, but sustained Chinese coercion of Taiwan naturally requires sustained US efforts to counter that coercion.

The main point: Xi Jinping’s report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China—in particular, its prioritization of security over the economy—supports the argument that the PRC threat to Taiwan is growing more urgent. The United States should respond with urgency of its own.