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SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE 20TH PARTY CONGRESS: THE XI JINPING ERA ENTERS ITS SECOND DECADE

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Editor's Introduction—Special Issue on the 20th Party Congress: The Xi Jinping Era Enters its Second Decade

John S. Van Oudenaren



(Image: Xi waves during celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC on October 1, 2019, Source: Xinhua)

On August 31, state media announced a determination reached at a Politburo meeting the previous day that the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), henceforth the 20th Party Congress, will commence in Beijing on October 16 ([People's Daily](#), August 31). During the week-long conclave, delegates will select the next Central Committee, the CCP's de jure highest official body, which includes slightly over 200 full and 170 alternate members ([Xinhua](#), October 24, 2017). The Central Committee will then determine the members of the Party's de facto top leadership bodies: the (most likely) seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and the 25-member Politburo.

On September 9, the Politburo held another meeting, which included reviewing proposed amendments to the Party Constitution (not to be confused with the People's Republic of China [PRC] state constitution, which was amended at the 2018 National People's Congress to eliminate presidential term limits). According to the

meeting readout, the amendments will update the constitution to fully “reflect the latest achievements in the modernization of Marxism in China and the new governance of the country proposed by the Central Committee” since the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 ([People's Daily](#), September 10). At the sixth Plenum in November 2021, the Central Committee passed a historical resolution lionizing Xi Jinping's achievements in governance and ideology, which stated that “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” embodies “the best of the Chinese culture and ethos in our times and represents a new breakthrough in adapting Marxism to the Chinese context” ([China Brief](#), November 12, 2021). In this context, the Politburo's determination to revise the constitution indicates that the forthcoming amendments will further entrench the centrality of Xi Jinping Thought in contemporary CCP ideology. This and other signs, such as the recent full-throated revival of the personality cult surrounding Xi in state media and mass culture, as well as the comparatively early scheduling of the Party Congress during the traditional October-November time window, support the hypothesis that Xi is in a commanding political position, despite the panoply of international and domestic challenges facing the PRC ([China Brief](#), September 9).

As there is little suspense around the prospects of Xi retaining the paramount positions as CCP General Secretary and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), most of the uncertainty heading into the 20th Party Congress surrounds turnover (promotions and retirements) of the other members of the top party and military leadership bodies. These are the members of the PBSC; the members of the Politburo; the First Secretary and the six other members of the Secretariat—the executive body responsible for implementing the Politburo's directives; the Chairman, Vice Chairmen and Members of the CMC; and the Secretary, deputy secretary and members of the Standing Committee of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) (for an official list of the members of the top leadership bodies appointed at the 19th Party Congress, see [Xinhua](#), October 25, 2017).

The myriad questions about who will work under Xi to lead the party-state's key organs for the next half-decade will be answered when the Congress concludes ([China Brief](#), August 12). Further clarity will be provided when the top government leaders who sit on the State Council are announced at the closure of the National People's Congress in March 2023 ([China Daily](#), March 19, 2018). In the long-term however, Xi's inability or unwillingness to address the succession issue that plagues all non-monarchical, one-party states fosters immense uncertainty in the PRC system. Xi has rolled back the very modest progress made in the 1990s and 2000s to institutionalize the succession processes for the top-leadership posts. Moreover, the lack of a clear successor as Xi begins his second decade in power is likely to intensify the political maneuvering among sixth and seventh generation cadres as the General Secretary enters old age. Even if Xi self-selects a successor, as Mao Zedong attempted to do several times, there is no guarantee that such an anointed future leader would have the political clout to take the reins, particularly if the prevailing sentiment among other party elites is to move in an ideological or strategic direction that is at odds with Xi's vision for China.

Despite the great deal of over-the-horizon uncertainty, Xi remaining in position as core leader portends general continuity for his policies, strategic approach and ideological priorities in the short to medium term. Nevertheless, questions remain as to whether Xi will change course on policy to address the burgeoning array of challenges that threaten the goals he has established for the PRC of achieving full “socialist modernization” by 2035 and national rejuvenation by mid-century ([Qiushi](#), February 7). Will he undertake market-oriented reforms to moderate the enormous inefficiencies produced by state dominance of the economic and financial

systems? Will he eventually opt to roll back, or at least moderate, the strict zero-COVID epidemic prevention measures that have engendered mass frustration and been a millstone dragging down the economy? Finally, will Xi take to heart the lessons of the war in Ukraine and recalibrate a foreign policy that is geared toward confrontation with the U.S.?

Against this backdrop, *China Brief* has asked five leading experts to lay out briefly what to expect in five key areas during the second decade of Xi's tenure.

Elite Politics

The issue begins with a special interview with Willy Wo-Lap Lam, who has been a leading chronicler of elite politics in China since the Deng Xiaoping era. Dr. Lam discusses the significance of the 20th Party Congress and considers its implications for the political trajectory of China over the next decade and beyond.

Economics

In "The Economic Outlook for Xi's Third Term: Mounting Challenges, Dwindling Fiscal and Monetary Options," Alicia García-Herrero breaks down Beijing's narrowing range of options for dealing with a difficult economic situation coming out of the 20th Party Congress.

Military

In "Will PLA Modernization Continue Apace in Xi's Second Decade?," Joel Wuthnow examines the outlook during Xi's third term for sustaining the rapid pace of military modernization that the PRC has undertaken during Xi's first two terms.

Taiwan Policy

In "Beijing Signals a Harder Line Policy on Taiwan Through the 20th Party Congress and Beyond," John Dotson analyzes the PRC's official response to U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recent visit and assesses the outlook for Taiwan policy in Xi's third term.

Corruption and the Anti-Corruption Campaign

In "All the President's Men – Corruption in the Xi Jinping Era" Martin Purbrick examines the enduring role of corruption and efforts to eradicate it in PRC politics, observing that these dynamics will continue to shape China's political landscape in the era of Xi.

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**The 20th Party Congress and the Future of Elite Politics in China:
An Interview with Willy Wo-Lap Lam**

Willy Wo-Lap Lam



(Image: Xi Jinping and other members of the Politburo Standing Committee attend the centennial of the Chinese Communist Party's founding in Beijing on July 1, 2021, Source: Xinhua)

It is widely perceived that President Xi Jinping sees China as enmeshed in a broader struggle between an axis of authoritarian powers on the one hand and the U.S. and its allies, a coalition of (largely) liberal democracies on the other. What is driving Xi to embrace geostrategic competition with the U.S. to a greater extent than his predecessors ? Do you think Xi will continue down the same path following the 20th Party Congress?

Xi Jinping's most famous slogans, which call for the realization of "the Chinese dream" and the "great renaissance of the Chinese nation", are underpinned by his conviction that "the East is rising while the West is declining." This approach is much different from the ethos of Deng Xiaoping, the chief architect of reform, who once said that "countries that get on well with the U.S. have all prospered" (Guancha.cn, June 10, 2019; Phoenix TV, December 25, 2015). Largely due to the economic, technological and geopolitical contention between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the U.S.-led "democratic" alliance, however, a veritable new cold war has erupted between China, on the one hand, and the U.S. and its European and Asian allies, on the other (Project Syndicate, June 17; [South China Morning Post \[SCMP\]](http://South China Morning Post [SCMP]), April 20). Partly due to the Xi

administration's "no limits" support of Vladimir Putin's Russia as well as Beijing's pugilistic projection of hard power in the Taiwan Strait, the Sea of Japan, and the South China Sea, Beijing has become relatively isolated on the world stage. The country is also on the receiving end of debilitating sanctions levied on its exports, its efforts to attract investors and its access to key components that are integral to the technology sector.

In response to these challenges, Xi hopes to buttress China's capacity to beat back the challenge posed by the U.S.-led alliance by forming a kind of axis of authoritarian states along with Russia and other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) including Pakistan, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states ([The Diplomat](#), August 22; [Modern diplomacy.eu](#), July 30). Potential members of this axis also include Iran, North Korea and Myanmar. While meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Uzbekistan on September 15, Xi said "China is willing to make efforts with Russia to assume the role of great powers, and play a guiding role to inject stability and positive energy into a world rocked by social turmoil." Despite Putin's admission that China had "questions and concerns" over the Ukraine issue, the Russian leader said Moscow and Beijing would work together to form "a just, democratic and multipolar world" ([The Moscow Times](#), September 15; [Globalnews.ca](#), September 15).

The across-the-board struggle between the U.S.-led and the China-led blocs is expected to intensify after the 20th Party Congress. Both China and the U.S. view their all-out contest as an existential zero-sum game. And in view of the diminution of their symbiotic economic and climate-related cooperation – which used to provide some level of stability to the rivalry – the prospect of an amelioration of ties is low ([Cn.nytimes](#), September 14; [Foreign Policy](#), June 27).

China is presently dealing with several severe challenges, the continued threat of COVID-19 and a sputtering economy. Could these issues force Xi to change course in some policy areas during his third term?

In light of the CCP's lack of ballot-box legitimacy, economic growth and overall public support or at least acquiescence are key elements of the party's legitimacy. Apart from so-called *hongwumao* (红五毛, red 50 cents)—a commonly used term for Netizens paid to sing the party's praises on social media—a substantial portion of citizens are frustrated by problems including pandemic-related quarantines, growing unemployment, declining spending power on consumer goods, as well as the real-estate and banking crises ([VOAChinese](#), September 15; [Cn.wsj.com](#), September 14). After the 20th Party Congress, Xi is expected to sustain a substantial number of measures employed by Premier Li Keqiang and other State Council technocrats, in particular to continue to inject liquidity into the economy in order to aggressively promote growth, and to persuade investors from Western and Asian nations not to pull out of the "world's factory" ([China Brief](#), September 9).

However, the State Council's preferred remedies consist mostly of the decades-old formula of boosting infrastructure spending, which has been responsible for the immense debt amassed at all levels of government as well as by state-owned enterprises and private conglomerates ([Gov.cn](#), July 6; [Xinhua](#), May 6). Xi has declared his preference for a "whole country systemic approach" (举国体制, *juguotizhi*) whereby resources must be used in a "concentrated and focused" manner by the party-state authorities in key areas such as

technological innovation ([People's Daily](#), September 7; [Qstheory.cn](#), June 10). He has also discussed the importance of “internal circulation,” which is shorthand for the semi-autarkist policy of relying on China’s vast domestic market to generate economic growth. These developments do not augur well for a return to the key tenets of Deng’s market-oriented, open-door policy.

Top leaders, including President Xi and Premier Li, have claimed that Beijing’s ability to control the number of COVID cases and prevent pandemic-caused deaths demonstrates the superiority of the Chinese versus the Western system of governance. Cadres have also been encouraged to demonstrate loyalty to supreme leader Xi by carrying out thorough and efficient quarantine operations ([Chinesenewsgroup.com](#), September 7; [Radio French International](#), June 28).

Draconian lockdowns have not only stymied the economy and alienated ordinary people but have also raised questions about the efficacy of PRC-made vaccines and large-scale corruption involved in the entire testing, vaccine manufacturing and quarantine mechanisms. As pandemic-related measures have dealt a frontal blow to the economy, the post-Congress leadership may make some pragmatic changes to the scope and execution of quarantine measures – but the main elements of the “dynamic zero-Covid policy” could remain well in place into 2023.

The Politburo held a study session on September 9 to review forthcoming amendments to the CCP Constitution that will be adopted at the 20th Party Congress. Both the PRC State Constitution and the Party Constitution have been revised several times since the early 1980s. What does this round of amendments seek to accomplish?

The CCP or Party Constitution, which is to be distinguished from the PRC or State Constitution, was already amended at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 to enshrine “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” as the guiding light of the party. The proposed revision might further elevate Xi’s status by inserting the “two establishes” (两个确立, *liang ge que li*) principle into the supreme charter: “establish the position of comrade Xi Jinping as the core of the *dangzhongyang* [central party authorities] and the core of the whole party; and establish the overriding status of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” ([China Daily](#), September 10; [SCMP](#), September 10). The CCP Charter might also be revised to abolish term limits for the positions of the CCP General Secretary and the Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission ([Radio Free Asia](#), September 11; [VOAChinese](#), September 10). In its current form, the Party Constitution does not have clear-cut stipulations on the length of the tenure of these two topmost slots. In 2018, however, the State Constitution was amended to abolish term limits for the post of State President, which had formerly been limited to two terms of five years each.

How is this 20th Party Congress similar and different from others in the post-Mao era? Are we in for any surprises?

Strongmen hate surprises—and will go the distance to ensure such events are carefully choreographed beforehand. This is why supreme leader Xi has repeatedly cautioned against “black swans” appearing in Chinese politics ([Beijing Daily](#), August 20; [Xitheory.China.com](#), May 9). The putative Mao Zedong of the 21st century has solid confidence in the nation’s artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted mass surveillance apparatus; so

he has not been daunted by the spate of demonstrations that have broken out in several provinces over bank and real-estate defaults and related scandals ([China Brief](#), July 18). Instead, most of Xi's energy has been consumed with finalizing personnel arrangements ahead of the 20th Party Congress that will consolidate the domination of his faction and at the same time generate enough leeway to pacify opposition factions as well as party elders, many of whom have been disturbed by Xi's apparent Maoist restoration and his anti-U.S. and anti-Western stance ([Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), September 9; [Asia Society](#), August 4).

Even in the Era of Reform and Opening Up, the party leadership has always had penultimate control over the aspirations of the 2,300-odd Congress deputies as well as newly elected Central Committee members, although the latter often make use of the five-yearly conclave to voice their sometimes unorthodox views on public policy. Given that this congress is mostly about eulogizing the wisdom and achievements of one man, it is highly doubtful that new ideas will emerge to rekindle the economy, handle the pandemic, or improve relations with the U.S.

A decade ago, the top leadership position in the PRC was often described as a “primus inter pares” or “first among equals.” Is this model now obsolete given the power amassed by Xi, and if so, how should we conceive of elite politics and factional rivalry in the Xi era?

Largely to prevent the phenomena of personality cults and over-concentration of powers in the hands of just one strongman, Deng Xiaoping began the Era of Reform with a number of important institutional reforms. One major liberalization measure was the substitution of one-man rule with collective leadership, with power largely shared among the respective members of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) with the General Secretary merely the “first among equals.” Chinese cadres referred to this model as “nine dragons [sharing responsibility] for taming the rivers” (九龙治水, *Jiulong zhishui*; [HK01.com](#), August 11, 2019; [Yazhou Zhoukan](#), July 15, 2019). However, Xi Jinping has, since the beginning of his ascendancy to power in late 2012, successfully concentrated all powers of decision-making into his own hands. Nonetheless, remnants of two powerful party factions, the Communist Youth League Faction led by Premier Li Keqiang and the Shanghai Faction previously led by former President Jiang Zemin, have remained as minority members in the Politburo and the PBSC ([China Brief](#), October 14, 2021). The hold of Xi—and the Xi Jinping faction—over power in areas ranging from ideology and personnel to finance and foreign policy will be enhanced after the 20th Party Congress ([China Brief](#), August 12). This will mark a partial return to the Mao Zedong era of the 1960s and 1970s, when the “Great Helmsman” ruled with near-absolutist authority.

Is competition underway in the CCP to be Xi's successor? What if Xi suddenly died tomorrow? Would the system be thrown into chaos?

If Xi rules until the 22nd Party Congress in 2032, he will have ten years to find a successor. The succession issue—as well as whether the CCP can cope with an unexpected event such as the sudden incapacitation of the supreme leader—is a taboo for the official media and heavily censored social media. Due to the longstanding rule of *qishangbaxia* (七上八下; retirement at 68, possibly one more term for cadres aged 67 or under), Sixth-Generation (6G) rising stars—officials born in the 1960s who would become PBSC members at the 20th or 21st Party Congress in 2027—might end up being only transitional figures ([China Brief](#), November

12, 2021). The top prospects to fill this role include Xi's protégé and principal adviser, Ding Xuexiang (born 1962) and the Party Secretary of Chongqing, Chen Min'er (1960). Ding, however, will be 70 years old, and Chen 72 at the 22nd Party Congress (Chinafocus.com, April 7; Cn.nytimes, February 14). As only members of the Seventh Generation (7G) or officials born in the 1970s can satisfy the age requirement, potential successors to Xi have not yet projected a strong image on the political stage (China Brief, April 9, 2019). None of these cadres have reached beyond vice-ministerial status or its equivalent. Moreover, the neophytes only have several years to make a nationally significant achievement so as to earn promotion to the very top (SCMP, August 29; Thinkchina.sg, December 6, 2021).

There is no popular vote for CCP General Secretary, but what is Xi's case as a "leader for life" to ordinary people, rank-and-file party members, and his fellow elites? Basically, what is Xi's "stump speech"?

Most Chinese were either born or started working in the three to four decades after Deng Xiaoping initiated the Era of Reform in late 1978. Xi has reversed most of Deng's teachings, ranging from "thought liberation" and collective leadership to empowering private firms and attracting Western capital. The CCP has successfully depoliticized the population, shifting the focus and energy of most people from politics to purely economic pursuits. However, Xi has never won genuine support from the majority of citizens and cadres for his anti-reformist measures, above all reviving a cult personality, which includes lifelong tenure for himself. Rising unemployment and the middle class's big losses in the stock and property markets will make it doubly difficult for Xi to justify high-sounding but vacuous slogans such as "the great renaissance of the Chinese nation." The "Chinese dream" – which includes the reunification of Taiwan and the emergence of China as the new Middle Kingdom – is the basis of Xi's bid to become "ruler for life" (Indianexpress.com, November 16, 2021; Asia.nikkei.com, October 21, 2021). Yet the still formidable gap between Chinese and American economic, technological and military power could mean that the East will not necessarily supplant the West – and Xi's perceived inability to attain this epochal goal could detract from the legitimacy of his claim to be China's "Second Mao Zedong."

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The Economic Outlook for Xi's Third Term: Mounting Challenges, Dwindling Fiscal and Monetary Options

Alicia García-Herrero



(Image: Xi visits a forest park on his inspection tour of Jinzhou in Liaoning Province this August, Source: Xinhua)

Introduction

China's decade-long economic slowdown is accelerating. The pace has picked up since former U.S. President Donald Trump launched his trade war against China in early 2018, and even more so since the COVID-19 pandemic started in early 2020. This year has been particularly difficult as stubborn zero-COVID policies have ground the economy to a halt, further pushed by the bursting of the real estate bubble that had been China's most important engine of growth for decades.

Many ask themselves how much of China's deceleration is cyclical and how much is structural, but also how much can be reverted. On the first issue, the cyclical element of the ongoing deceleration of the Chinese economy is clearly important and adds additional downward pressure to the well-known structural factors, such as aging and decreasing labor productivity.

Zero-COVID Policy and Property Bubble Combine to Dim Growth Prospects

Cyclical factors have been made more acute by zero-COVID policies, which are estimated to have cost the economy two percentage points of growth in 2022 by reducing mobility and, thereby, consumption. In addition, the demise of the real estate sector is another important factor adding downward pressure on growth, whose effects will be more enduring. Against this backdrop, Chinese policy-makers have been announcing successive rounds of fiscal and monetary stimulus for months, as a way to achieve the official 5.5 percent growth ([People's Republic of China \[PRC\] Ministry of Finance \[MOF\]](#), August 25). By now, it is apparent that the target will not be achieved notwithstanding these efforts to support the economy on both the fiscal and monetary fronts.

The question, thus, is whether President Xi Jinping's third term may change this reality, and if so, how? While the economic situation is clearly difficult both for structural and cyclical reasons, the fact that Xi has continued to push for zero-COVID policies casts light on the direction that he is seeking to move in with his economic agenda. Hitherto, there are no clear signs that Xi will change his zero-COVID policies at the outset of his third term. On the contrary, stringent zero-COVID epidemic restriction measures, including mass lockdowns, have remained in place, even in extreme circumstances such as the recent 6.8 magnitude earthquake that struck the mega-city of Chengdu in Sichuan province earlier this month ([South China Morning Post](#), September 6). If there was a time to lift mobility restrictions, it would be now in the run-up to the 20th Party Congress so as to avoid discontent among the population given the massively negative impact of such restrictions on population movement, consumption and economic activity, more generally.

The other big shock affecting the Chinese economy today is the bursting of the real estate bubble. Based on other countries' experience struggling to absorb the excesses of a burst real estate bubble, the first years of Xi's third term will be defined by a painful economic adjustment process. Undoing such overcapacity in the property sector will imply lower investment in the real estate sector for years, with obvious negative consequences on growth ([Caixin Global](#), September 1).

As the zero-COVID policies and the consequences of the bursting of the real estate bubble are bound to continue to exert a negative impact on the economy after Xi Jinping's re-appointment, one could imagine that policymakers will be asked to step up their efforts to jump start growth coming out of the Party Congress. The problem is that extensive efforts have already been made to use both fiscal and monetary policies to support growth this year in an attempt to meet the official 5.5 percent target, but to no avail. In fact, while fiscal and monetary policies are already laxer than last year, these measures have clearly not been enough to bring the growth rate back to the desirable path.

Back to Beijing's Old Playbook?

The reason for this, which is not bound to change during Xi's third term, is the lack of workable options on fiscal and, even, monetary policy. Starting with fiscal policy, the government has often announced the use of infrastructure investment as a stimulus tool since the second half of 2021 and, especially, the second quarter of 2022, but these injections have not generated enough growth to get close to the official target. Indeed, infrastructure investment increased at a decent 7.4 percent year-over-year rate from January to July, but at

least 18 percent would have been required to achieve the official growth target ([Xinhua](#), August 31). Furthermore, the stagnant growth so far has weighed on China's tax revenues, making it harder for local governments to engage in infrastructure spending, especially as their COVID-19 epidemic prevention expenditures remain high ([Caixin Global](#), July 5). By July, the narrowly defined general government deficit was 65 percent of the annual budget deficit, which is significantly higher than previous years ([Barron's](#), September 12; [Gov.cn](#), August 17).

The fiscal situation appears even more concerning when another critical component of the government deficit is considered, namely the government fund, which is supported by government land auctions ([PRC Ministry of Finance](#), July 14). Due to the slump in property sales, the year-to-date government fund deficit has already reached 94 percent of the annual budget deficit ([Bloomberg](#), July 29). Therefore, while the government needs to continue its expansionary fiscal policy to keep the current growth momentum, the room left in the budget to support further expenditures is very limited. As such, Xi might need to reform the economic relations between the central and local governments to increase the efficiency of fiscal policy. This, however, will probably bring to light much more debt, which will be regarded as public, thereby undermining part of the regained fiscal space.

On the monetary policy side, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) has taken an accommodative stance since the beginning of the year. In fact, the central bank cut the one-year and five-year loan prime rate twice and three times, respectively, to lower funding costs for the corporate sector and mortgages ([Sohu](#), August 22). The PBOC also reduced the required reserve ratio in April to unleash more liquidity ([Xinhua](#), April 20). As inflation is still comparatively low in China, there is in principle some room for further rate cuts, but again this is very limited and it is hard to argue that Xi Jinping's in his third term will be able to change course. Moreover, a move to push rates too low could have a number of detrimental effects. First, Chinese banks' financial health has been weakening for years, especially for smaller banks. With additional cuts, banks may find their net interest margin reduced at a time when their asset quality, and therefore profitability, is worsening. In addition, given the hawkish stance of the Federal Reserve and the increasingly less appealing yield differential between China and the U.S., capital outflows may increase and further weigh down the renminbi. In other words, the PBOC is in a bind and will remain in a bind for quite some time. In principle, it needs to cut rates to support the economy but faces too many constraints in doing so.

Conclusion

All in all, there will be strong incentives for President Xi, after receiving a mandate for a third term at the Party Congress, to keep expansionary fiscal and monetary policies in place in order to show a better growth picture. However, the room for maneuver is much more limited than in the past. The fall in fiscal revenue will continue to constrain the government's ability to invest in infrastructure, even as the return on assets of such projects has declined. The PBOC will also find it hard to push interest rates too low given the concerns about financial health and the rising yield differential between China and the U.S. Because of these policy constraints, in addition to the likely continuation of zero-COVID policies in one form or another, as well as the swallowing of the excess related to the demise of the real estate sector, growth prospects for China under President Xi's new term should be underwhelming and possibly not go above three percent in 2023 and beyond.

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Will PLA Modernization Continue Apace in Xi's Second Decade?

Joel Wuthnow



(Image: Xi Jinping inspects the Central Military Commission's (CMC) joint battle command with other CMC members in November 2017, **source:** China Daily)

Introduction

Compared to his predecessors, Xi Jinping has been relatively focused on military modernization, which he views as a prerequisite for achieving the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation by mid-century ([Xinhua](#), July 1). Modernization is a process and not an endpoint; Xi will face new tasks and challenges after the 20th Party Congress. This article previews changes in China’s military high command next month, outlines the next steps for People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and identifies challenges that could frustrate Xi and his “strong army” vision in the years ahead.

New Leadership

Xi Jinping will maintain his position as Central Military Commission (CMC) chairman but will have a new slate of senior officers to advise him. Four of the six current CMC members are expected to depart at the 20th Party Congress due to reaching the normal retirement age of 68, including both Vice Chairmen (Xu Qiliang and Zhang Youxia); only two members (Political Work Department Director Miao Hua and Discipline

Inspection Commission Director Zhang Shengmin) are likely to remain ([Gov.cn](#)). Both Miao and Zhang are professional political commissars, who will provide continuity in sensitive responsibilities for maintaining party control over the PLA. Yet barring a decision by Xi to overturn the age limits, it is likely that no one with operational expertise will remain on the new CMC.

The new CMC members will be drawn from a pool of about 25 potential candidates who are currently in positions one level below the CMC. As a cohort, the next CMC will be similar in some ways to their predecessors – joining the PLA in the final two decades of the Cold War, attaining career success mostly in a pre-reform PLA dominated by the ground force, and demonstrating loyalty to Xi and his agenda (as evidenced by having survived purges of top military brass during Xi's first decade).

Who is selected, however, could influence future CMC strategic and operational decisions. Appointing a technically literate officer such as former Strategic Support Force commander Gao Jin would ensure knowledge on joint operations and innovation in the high command, while elevating Eastern Theater Commander Lin Xiangyang would provide an authoritative voice on Taiwan Strait dynamics. Such choices can be read as indications of the types of expertise that Xi values and thus his underlying priorities.

Below the CMC level, there will also be a gradual transition to a cadre of younger and more highly educated officers who will be entrusted with steering the PLA's transformation into a more modern force. This transition will unfold as their superiors hit the normal retirement ages over the next decade. [1]

Next Steps for Modernization

A new cadre of senior officers will oversee the PLA's continued modernization. Various dates are important for strategic planning, including the PLA's centennial in 2027. At the fifth plenum of the 19th Party Congress in October 2020, the party's elite focused on two other timeframes: the 14th five-year plan (2021-2025) and the party's long-range goal of "basically completing military modernization" by 2035 ([Xinhua](#), November 3). There is also an even longer-term ambition to field "world-class" forces by the centennial of the PRC in 2049. [2] The development of the armed forces is to proceed in parallel with and support the party's larger agenda both in the near term and into future decades.

The party has directed the PLA to prioritize several areas. The first is improving the military's ability to conduct joint operations. The structural reforms initiated in 2015-6 have produced a modern joint command system—for instance, theater commands now have naval and air force units at their disposal in peacetime. The Eastern Theater Command was thus in a better position to organize a series of military operations around Taiwan after Speaker Pelosi's recent visit. However, jointness, like modernization, is a process. Party directives have endorsed a continued focus on "joint training," "joint support," and cultivation of joint staff officers and commanders ([Xinhua](#), November 26, 2021).

The second area of focus is the integration of cutting-edge technology into PLA force structure. Following the 5th plenum, a spokesperson noted that the integration of "mechanization," "informatization," and "intelligentization" would be a prerequisite for the PLA's centennial celebrations in 2027 ([Xinhua](#), October

26, 2020). Disruptive capabilities such as hypersonic missiles, in other words, should be fielded as soon as possible and not delayed until less advanced capabilities are fully modernized.

The third is developing closer cooperation between civilian and military planning, which Xi has prioritized under the label “military-civil fusion.”[3] The fifth plenum report highlighted the need to better integrate the military with civilian R&D in critical sectors—a necessary precondition for fielding “intelligent” military capabilities—but also to deepen cooperation in other areas, such as logistics, infrastructure construction at home and abroad, national defense mobilization, national defense education, domestic emergency response and border defense ([Xinhua](#), October 29, 2020).

Progress in these three areas—joint operations, advanced equipment, and military-civil fusion—will enhance PLA capabilities and thus confidence in escalating disputes against regional rivals. Such improvements would also be necessary for the PLA to provide party leaders with more effective options to undertake combat operations. However, it is important to note that party documents focus more on force-building than on specific operational timelines (such as a purported 2027 deadline for reunification with Taiwan) ([China Brief](#), March 26, 2021). [4] Any war of choice would depend on perceptions of military readiness as well as economic and political costs and risks, which could change in Xi’s second decade in power. [5]

Problems and Prospects

Several challenges could frustrate the party’s ability to realize its military modernization agenda. One problem would be a deterioration in China’s security situation that requires the PLA to prioritize operations over acquisitions. Maintaining a higher operational tempo in the Taiwan Strait will obviously expend finite resources. The PLA could also be called on to deal with an unforeseen domestic emergency. In his speech to PLA representatives at the 2021 National People’s Congress, Xi pointedly remarked that social stability remains “unstable and uncertain” ([China Daily](#), March 9, 2021). Such concerns were far from theoretical as evidenced by recent protests in Shanghai and elsewhere, many in response to lockdowns and other zero-COVID restrictions.[6]

There are also questions about whether the PLA can sustain access to technology and expertise necessary for advanced warfighting. Western economies are increasingly erecting fences around high-tech industries, which could deprive the PLA of necessary equipment, know-how, and even educational opportunities for its officers. Meanwhile, competition from Chinese firms means that the PLA will struggle with recruitment and retention of technically competent personnel, driving up labor costs and reducing budget share available for acquisition.

Finally, an economic slowdown would intensify tradeoffs for the party. Slowing growth would require the party to choose between sustaining increases in military spending (7.1 percent in 2022) and advancing other governance priorities ([China Daily](#), March 6). Reflecting an awareness of resource limitations, the party has instructed the PLA to streamline its internal management processes and pursue “symbiotic” developments with the civilian sector, which underscores that China is not immune from the same “guns versus butter” dilemmas that other countries face ([Sohu](#), March 14, 2021).

In sum, Xi will have new officers advising him on what is certain to be a full agenda for military modernization after the 20th Party Congress. Success is not guaranteed, but is contingent on navigating obstacles that could hinder achievement of Xi's "strong army" vision and force him to choose between military and developmental objectives.

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Notes

[1] Retirement ages are typically 63 for Theater Command Leader-grade officers and 61 for Theater Command Deputy Leader-grade officers. For more detail, see Joel Wuthnow, *Gray Dragons: Assessing China's Senior Military Leadership*, NDU China Strategic Perspectives 16, 2022, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3156126/gray-dragons-assessing-chinas-senior-military-leadership/>.

[2] Collectively, 2027, 2035, and mid-century have been grouped as milestone in a revised "three-step development strategy" for the PLA. See Brian Hart, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Matthew P. Funaiolo, "China's 2027 Goal Marks the PLA's Centennial, Not an Expedited Military Modernization," *China Brief*, March 26, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-plas-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization/>.

[3] Alex Stone and Peter Wood, *China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020).

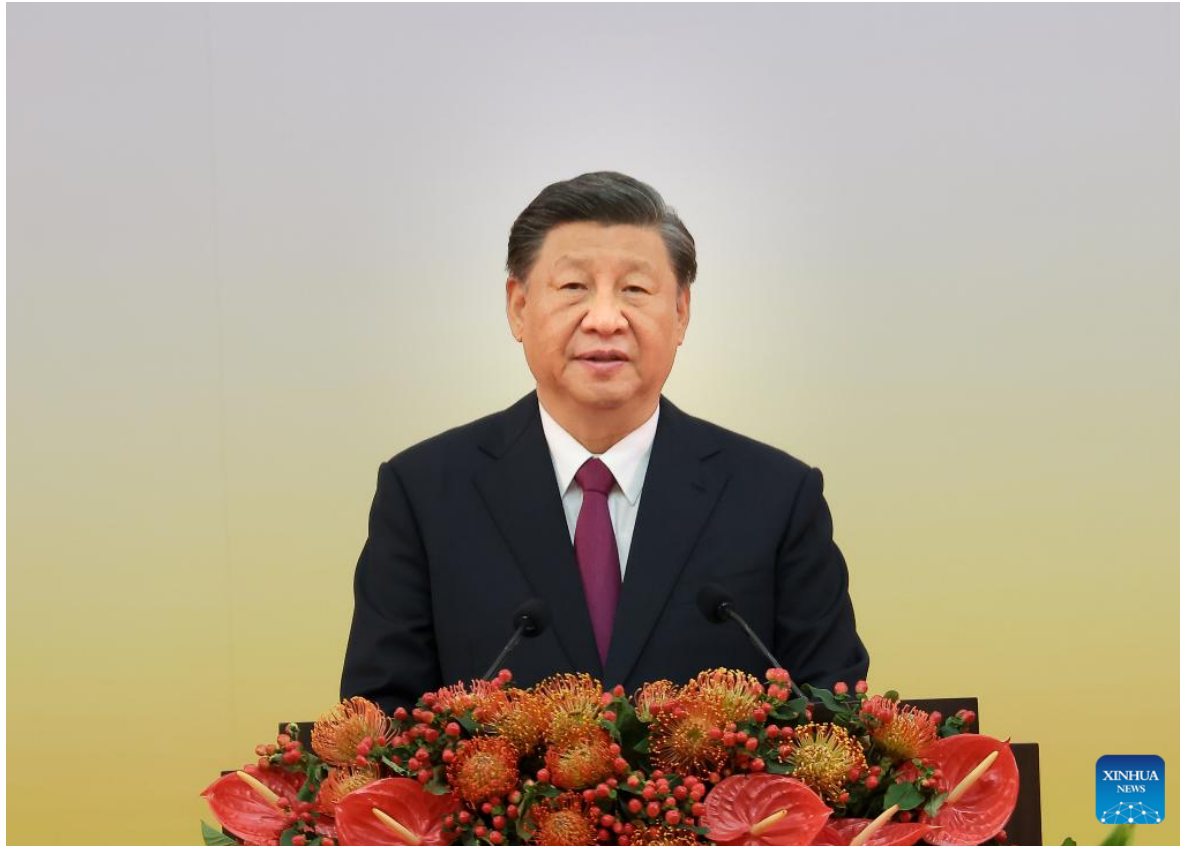
[4] M. Taylor Fravel, "China's 'World-Class Military' Ambitions: Origins and Implications," *The Washington Quarterly* 43:1 (2020), 85-99.

[5] Andrew Scobell, "China's Calculus on the Use of Force: Futures, Costs, Benefits, Risks, and Goals," in Joel Wuthnow et al., eds., *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War with Taiwan* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), 65-84.

[6] Such concerns could drive greater tradeoffs between PLA modernization budgets and internal security spending, which has been increasing in recent years. For an overview, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens, "Rethinking China's Coercive Capacity: An Examination of PRC Domestic Security Spending," *China Quarterly* 232 (2017), 1002-1025.

Beijing Signals a Harder Line Policy on Taiwan Through the 20th Party Congress and Beyond

By John Dotson



(Image: Xi speaks on the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong's retrocession to China and calls for faithful implementation of the "one country, two systems" policy, source: Xinhua)

Beijing Steps Up the Pressure on Taiwan in August

Following the visit to Taiwan by U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi in early August, military forces of the People's Republic of China (PRC) conducted a high-profile series of military maneuvers around the island, intended as a demonstration of the PRC's capacity to initiate a joint strike and blockade campaign against Taiwan (*Global Taiwan Brief*, [August 24](#); [September 7](#)). The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Eastern Theater Command, upon announcing the exercises and attendant closure areas on August 2, described their purpose in explicitly political terms as "stern deterrence directed against America's recent major negative escalations on the Taiwan problem, [and] are a serious warning directed at 'Taiwan independence' forces striving on the 'independence' path" ([Xinhua](#), August 2).

Although the military exercises—and the more provocative and coercive military posture they portend—understandably gripped world headlines, they were only one component of a larger PRC pressure campaign against Taiwan. Throughout the month of August, these military measures were matched by parallel actions in the diplomatic and informational realms, which seek to communicate to audiences in Taiwan and the international community the PRC's resolve to adhere to the eventual annexation of Taiwan under Beijing's "One China Principle" (一个中国原则, *Yige Zhongguo Yuanze*) and the rigid framework of "One Country, Two Systems" (一国两制, *Yi Guo Liang Zhi*). Even more importantly, these moves are intended to assert to a domestic audience the authoritative position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership under General Secretary Xi Jinping in the lead-up to the CCP's 20th Party Congress, which will convene in October.

Wang Yi's Commentary on the "Three On Guard Againsts"

A prominent example of the PRC's informational campaign against not only Taiwan, but also its international supporters, was the commentary offered by PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) between August 7-10, in the final days of the declared PRC military exercises around Taiwan. Wang used the occasion of a visit to Bangladesh on August 7 to assail the United States for its alleged "three mistakes" (三方面错误, *san fangmian cuowu*) in conducting the Pelosi visit. These were, first, "crude interference in Chinese internal affairs" (粗暴干涉中国内政, *cubao ganshe Zhongguo neizheng*); second, "conniving in support of 'Taiwan independence' forces" (纵容支持“台独”势力, *zongrong zhichi "Taidu" shili*); and third, America's "deliberately wrecking peace in the Taiwan Strait" (三是蓄意破坏台海和平, *xuyi pohuai Taihai heping*) ([PRC Foreign Ministry](#), August 7).

This formulation was modified in subsequent messaging after Wang met with South Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin and Nepalese Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka in meetings held between August 8 and 10. After these meetings, PRC media publicized Wang's warning of the "Three On Guard Againsts" (三个警惕, *Sange Jingti*) in relation to the situation in the Taiwan Strait, which in turn were connected to "three dangerous tendencies" (三个危险动向, *sange weixian dongxiang*) in the region. Wang reportedly described these dangers as follows:

The first "On Guard Against" is that America is not reconciled to defeat, [and] is gathering partners to pour oil on the fire, expanding regional military deployments, promoting circumstances to further escalate, scheming to manufacture new and greater crises; the second "On Guard Against" is that "Taiwan independence" forces are erroneously judging circumstances, overestimating their own abilities, continuing to increase domestic and foreign connections, [and] insisting on going ever-farther on their own path of splitting the country and the Chinese nation; [and] the third 'On Guard Against' is that political figures in some countries are ignoring right and wrong... to the point of scheming to follow the example [of America], carrying out political performances, [and] seeking to pursue selfish political interests. ([Shangguan](#), August 14).

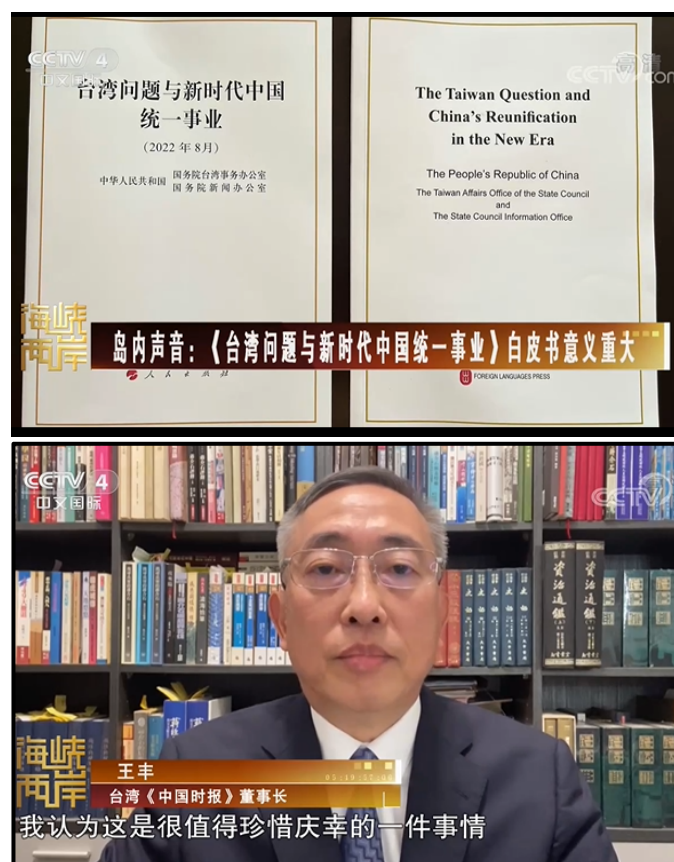
The PRC's New White Paper on Taiwan Policy

An even stronger message was provided on August 10, when the PRC State Council Taiwan Office (国务院台湾事务办公室, *Guowuyuan Taiwan Shiwu Bangongshi*) and State Council Information Office (国务院新闻办公室, *Guowuyuan Taiwan Shiwu Bangongshi*) jointly released a new policy white paper titled *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* (台湾问题与新时代中国统一事业, *Taiwan Wenti yu Xin Shidai Zhongguo Tongyi Shiye*) ([PRC Government](#), August 10). [1] This was the third official PRC white paper on Taiwan, having been preceded by earlier editions in 1993 and 2000. Both the earlier editions had promised Taiwan a high degree of autonomy following a future unification with the PRC. [2] The new white paper largely reiterates boilerplate themes and slogans advanced under Xi Jinping's tenure, but is still worth examining for what it says—and perhaps even more importantly, what it does not. In broad-brush terms, five general themes stand out in the white paper, as summarized below. [3]

Historical Arguments for China's Sovereignty Over Taiwan

Although the PRC has never governed Taiwan at any point since its founding in 1949, the white paper advances a series of selected historical arguments for China's sovereignty over Taiwan. The paper declares that "Taiwan has belonged to China since ancient times" (a questionable assertion, as the island existed outside Chinese administration for most of China's imperial history) before proceeding in more modern terms to the legacy of World War II. Citing wartime agreements that provided for the retrocession of Japanese-held territories, including Taiwan, to the Republic of China (ROC), the paper asserts that the ROC ceased to exist in 1949—and that as its successor state, the PRC enjoys full sovereignty over those territories.

The paper distorts the text of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758, passed in 1971 to give China's U.N. seat to the PRC, to assert that it represented U.N. recognition of PRC sovereignty over Taiwan ([United Nations](#), October 25, 1971). Finally, the document quotes the PRC's own 2005 *Anti-Secession Law* (反分裂国家法, *Fan Fenlie Guojiafa*) to state that "Both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China [and] China's sovereignty and territorial integrity brook no division...The state shall never allow the 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces to make Taiwan secede from China under any name or by any means" ([China.org.cn](#), March 14, 2005).



Images: PRC state media has made extensive use of persons from the marginal pro-unification spectrum of Taiwan politics to convey a narrative that most Taiwanese favor unification. Image left: The new white paper is depicted alongside a caption that reads: “Voices within the island: ‘The Taiwan Question and China’s Reunification in the New Era’ white paper has great significance.” Image right: Wang Feng (王豐), chairman of the board of the pro-Beijing China Times (中國時報) newspaper in Taiwan, appears on a PRC state television program to praise the new white paper. (Source: [CCTV](#), August 10)

The Villains: The United States and Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party

The paper’s preamble notes that “Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China’s complete reunification is a shared aspiration of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation.” In its explanation of why this vision remains unfulfilled, the PRC blames two sets of villains: the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in Taiwan, and Taiwan’s primary international patron, the United States. The paper asserts that “in recent years the Taiwan authorities, led by the DPP, have redoubled their efforts to divide the country, and some external forces have tried to exploit Taiwan to contain China, [and] prevent the Chinese nation from achieving complete reunification.” Much opprobrium is also directed at the U.S., where “Some forces... are making every effort to incite groups inside Taiwan to stir up trouble and use Taiwan as a pawn against China.” Such “anti-China forces... try to deny the legitimacy and justification of the Chinese government in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity,” and are “using Taiwan to contain China and obstruct China’s reunification, which should be thoroughly exposed and condemned.”

The Heroes: The CCP and Its Leader

As there are villains, there are also heroes: the CCP and its leader, Xi Jinping. The document, from its opening preamble, is effusive in its praise of Xi, asserting that “Under the strong leadership of the [CCP] Central Committee with Xi Jinping at the core, the [CCP] and the Chinese government have adopted new and innovative measures in relation to Taiwan.” Xi is particularly lauded for “propos[ing] major policies to advance the peaceful development of cross-Straits relations and the peaceful reunification of China in the new era.” These policies have included “seeking a Two Systems solution to the Taiwan question;” “abiding by the one-China principle;” “further integrating development across the Straits;” and “forging closer bonds of heart and mind between people on both sides of the Straits and strengthening joint commitment to peaceful reunification.”

Alongside such vague blandishments, the paper places a strong emphasis on the benefits of cross-Straits economic integration. It promises that: “After reunification, the systems and mechanisms for cross-Straits economic cooperation will be further improved... Backed up by the vast mainland market, Taiwan's economy will enjoy broader prospects, become more competitive, develop steadier and smoother industrial and supply chains, and display greater vitality in innovation-driven growth.”

The Centrality of “One Country, Two Systems”

Beijing’s longstanding framework of “One Country, Two Systems” under which Taiwan is promised broad autonomy for coming under the PRC flag—remains the central pillar of PRC policy towards Taiwan. (The 2022 white paper repeats these earlier promises, vowing that “[A]fter peaceful reunification, Taiwan may continue its current social system and enjoy a high degree of autonomy in accordance with the law. The two social systems will develop side by side for a long time to come.”) However, OCTS has been explicitly rejected by most mainstream political leaders in Taiwan including President Tsai Ing-wen ([Taipei Times](#), October 11, 2019). Furthermore, Beijing’s harsh crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong has shown its OCTS promises there to be hollow, and significantly soured public opinion in Taiwan towards any theoretical unification under the OCTS framework ([Taiwan News](#), August 7, 2020).

Despite this, the white paper adheres with the broader PRC policy of rigidly insisting on the OCTS framework. It asserts that “It is a fact that since Hong Kong and Macao returned to the motherland and were reincorporated into national governance, they have embarked on a broad path of shared development together with the mainland... The practice of One Country, Two Systems has been a resounding success.” The only reason for any dimming enthusiasm for OCTS is to be found with the evil scheming of the DPP: “Ever since [OCTS] was proposed, certain political forces have been misrepresenting and distorting its objectives. The DPP [has] done everything possible to target the principle with baseless criticisms, and this has led to misunderstandings about its aims in some quarters of Taiwan.”

The Role of “Peaceful” Unification in China’s “Rejuvenation”

The “great rejuvenation [or “revival”] of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴, *Zhonghua Minzu Weida Fuxing*) has been a staple slogan of CCP propaganda under Xi’s tenure. The white paper explicitly links this endeavor with the annexation of Taiwan, asserting that the recovery of Taiwan “is indispensable for the

realization of China's rejuvenation.” In the English language edition of the document, the word “rejuvenation” appears 28 times. This emphasis is even heavier in the Chinese edition, where *luxing* (复兴) appears 34 times, and where *Zhonghua Minzu Weida Luxing* (中华民族伟大复兴) appears 15 times.

It is noteworthy that the white paper maintains an emphasis on “peaceful reunification” (和平统一, *heping tongyi*), a phrase that appears 36 times in the English version, and 40 times in the Chinese edition. PRC state media has also this message in its coverage of the document ([CGTN](#), August 11). However, the document does not back away from any of the PRC’s previous threats to employ military force if it feels that other options have been exhausted.

Conclusion

The PRC’s coercive military activities directed against Taiwan in August have been accompanied by an informational campaign intended to reinforce Beijing’s increasingly hardline positions. Wang Yi’s comments—and to an even greater degree, the white paper—were among the most prominent elements of this campaign, intended to drive home four broad themes: the inevitability of unification; the ultimate futility of the nefarious schemes of America and the DPP to prevent it; the PRC’s unyielding resolve to achieve this unification on its own terms; and the of the CCP and its leadership in pursuing this goal as a fundamental component of “national rejuvenation.”

As the centerpiece of this propaganda effort, the white paper is noteworthy for what it says: in particular, its rigid insistence on the “One Country, Two Systems” formula, and the fact that its promises are made conditional on it (“Once peaceful reunification is achieved under One Country, Two Systems...”). However, as demonstrated by the example of Hong Kong, Beijing’s conception of OCTS would strip Taiwan of any genuine autonomy, and the formula enjoys negligible support in Taiwan outside of the fringe pro-unification spectrum of the island’s politics. Far from demonstrating the “innovative” policy approaches praised in the white paper, the CCP’s dogmatic adherence to OCTS shows how inflexible and moribund its Taiwan policy process truly is.

In this vein, the document is also noteworthy for what it omits: most significantly, the promise of the 1993 and 2000 white papers not to station PLA troops or CCP administrators in Taiwan. [4] This stands alongside public comments such as those made by PRC Ambassador to France Lu Shaye on August 3, and PRC Ambassador to Australia Xiao Qian on August 10, that Taiwan’s citizens would need to be “re-educated” after reunification in order to have a “correct understanding” of their relationship to the “motherland” ([Taiwan News](#), September 7). Such remarks, which are made to please bureaucratic superiors in Beijing rather than local audiences, further reinforce that the CCP leadership intends to bring Taiwan to heel using the same heavy-handed methods it has already employed in Hong Kong.

Beijing’s actions and messaging on Taiwan since early August, while playing poorly to the international community, have been intended primarily for a domestic audience. The CCP’s nationalist stance should be understood as a hard line set up to bolster Xi Jinping’s bid for a third term as CCP General Secretary at the upcoming 20th Party Congress. It would, however, be a mistake to assume a softer line after the conclusion of the party congress. If anything, once secure in a third term Xi will likely have a freer hand to pursue even more

aggressive and destabilizing moves in the Taiwan Strait. The hard line in Beijing's messaging this summer is likely a portent of further things to come.

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Notes

[1] It is worth noting that the State Council Information Office is an alter ego of the CCP Central Propaganda Department (中央宣传部, *Zhongyang Xuanchuan Bu*); the two names are used by the same bureaucratic entity, depending on whether it is acting in a party or outward state role.

[2] The 1993 document, *The Taiwan Question and Reunification of China*, was released in the course of the initial opening of CCP-Kuomintang negotiations in the early 1990s, and included the promise that Taiwan would be “distinguished from the other provinces or regions of China by its high degree of autonomy,” and that “the mainland will not dispatch troops or administrative personnel to the island” ([PRC State Council](#), August 1993). The 2000 document, *The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, was issued in February of that year—after Lee Teng-hui had infuriated Beijing with his 1999 statement that relations between the two sides represented “special state-to-state relations,” and immediately prior to the March 2000 elections in Taiwan that brought a Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) presidential administration to power for the first time. This document echoed the promises of the 1993 edition, promising that “after reunification, Taiwan will enjoy a high degree of autonomy, and the Central Government will not send troops or administrative personnel to be stationed in Taiwan” ([PRC State Council](#), February 2000).

[3] Quoted sections of the text are drawn from the official English-language version of the white paper: *The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era* (PRC State Council Information Office, August 10, 2022). <https://english.news.cn/20220810/df9d3b8702154b34bbf1d451b99bf64a/c.html>.

[4] See endnote #2, above.

All the President's Men – Corruption in the Xi Jinping Era

Martin Purbrick



(Image: Xi visits a local police station during his inspection tour of Xinjiang this July, **source:** Xinhua)

Introduction

Since the opening up of the Chinese economy by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, China has grown wealthy, but corruption has also become pervasive at all levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Corruption has been a part of Chinese business and governance for millennia, but despite the grand pronouncements of the CCP about eradicating corruption, it has not only endured under the current system but grown to extraordinary heights. Due to deeply entrenched corruption across the government, as well as the variable spread of economic benefits, this issue will remain a severe challenge for the CCP as the Xi Jinping era enters its second decade. The necessity for the state security agencies to support political control by Xi will also ensure that anti-corruption purges continue to impact the police and security agencies.

Purges Continue

In July, former Deputy Minister of Public Security Fu Zhenghua pleaded guilty in the Changchun Intermediate People's Court in Jilin Province to charges of bribery relating to 117 million yuan (\$17 million) and abuse of

power from 2005 to 2021. Fu's alleged corruption occurred during his tenure as Director of the Beijing Public Security Bureau (PSB) and later as Deputy Minister of Public Security, which involved oversight of policing across the People's Republic of China (PRC) ([South China Morning Post \(SCMP\)](#), July 29).

The arrest and conviction of Fu is part of a prolonged crackdown on corrupt officials during Xi Jinping's tenure, which from early 2021 onward, has focused on law enforcement agencies. The scale and extent of the crackdown indicates that policing in China may be endemically corrupt. The CCP aggressively pursues corruption that grew during the high economic growth years after 1979, which affected all arms of government but especially the PSB as its officers have been poorly paid with many consequently resorting to illegitimate means to benefit from the increasing wealth in China.

However, the continued arrests of senior officers indicate that Xi and his faction in the CCP intend to secure the loyalty of the PSB and other security agencies by using anti-corruption as a tool of control. The complete obedience of the PSB to the CCP and their reliability to implement restrictive social controls is an essential part of China's expanding police state that undergirds one-party rule. Corruption in the PSB at both junior and senior levels weakens public trust in policing and as a result, undermines the rule of the CCP in the police state.

Several recent corruption cases also involve action taken against officers who were members of political factions that may have posed a potential threat to President Xi and his clique of supporters, such as those associated with former CCP leaders Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang ([China Brief](#), October 14, 2021). This has led to the purge of a large number of senior officials in the public security system, and some in the state security bureaucracy, which may have been more about political loyalty than corruption. The aim of such a purge is to ensure obedience and fear amongst public security officials so that the security apparatus can be controlled by President Xi without fear of a challenge. However, these cases indicate that the individuals, as well as being possible political threats, were also deeply corrupt.

The PSB and the Party

PSBs at national, provincial, and municipal levels maintain public order, enforce all criminal laws, also have some responsibilities for national security and as a result, have a huge amount of power as the primary means by which the CCP exerts control over citizens. This control flows down from the national to local levels through the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), which coordinates the work of the provincial and municipal PSBs although they report directly to local leaders who have a great deal of autonomy and consequently, opportunity for misconduct.

The MPS has a policing role but also serves political security and counterintelligence functions. The MPS was created in 1949 with the abolishment of the Social Affairs Department of the Central Committee of the CCP and the absorption of its personnel. This enabled the move of public security functions from the Party to the state, although the leadership at that time were drawn from the ranks of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), either generals or political commissars, and the military maintained strong control or influence over the MPS up until the late 1970s. [1]

Although the MPS was separated from the CCP structure, it remained a tool of the Party under Mao Zedong and was essential to the survival of high-ranking CCP leaders during periods of instability. During the Cultural Revolution eight MPS Vice Ministers were arrested, suspended, or dismissed. In September 1966, PLA representatives took charge of the MPS using military force to impose control, and most of the former national, provincial and local police leaders were sent to CCP schools and labor camps for education. [2] Only after Deng Xiaoping started to implement reforms in 1975 were PLA officers gradually moved out of MPS leadership.

The reforms started by Deng did not really separate the Party and state in the MPS bureaucracy, which, like all organs of the PRC state, involved the Party having indirect influence over the policing and security agencies. PSB offices at the provincial and municipal level have leaders with multiple government and CCP roles, such as membership of local Party committees, which have an important role in police recruitment, promotion, salary and benefits, as well as resource allocation. [3] Despite formal separation, the Party has controlled the PSB since the creation of the MPS in 1949. As the Party controls the MPS, the influence of the CCP Secretary General (who is also the President) is paramount.

The PSB, Politics and Corruption

The large number of cases involving senior officers indicates that corruption in the PSB may be endemic. For so many cases at such senior levels, involving networks of police officers across different provinces, to occur over such a prolonged period of time suggests that corruption is not confined to isolated “bad apples,” but has become widespread across the PSB.

In January, Sun Lijun, Vice Minister of Public Security, pleaded guilty to charges of accepting bribes of 646 million yuan (\$95 million), manipulating the securities market, and illegally holding firearms ([Caixin](#), January 14). Sun began his police career in 1988, and in 2018 became the youngest Deputy Minister of the MPS, where he was in charge of the First Bureau responsible for domestic security in the PRC, including in Hong Kong and Macau, and was also part of a team sent to Wuhan at the start of the COVID-19 epidemic ([SCMP](#), July 8). For a senior officer with such sensitive responsibilities to be convicted of corruption is an extraordinary indictment of the system that allowed him to be promoted to such a level.

Other senior officers were implicated in the “Sun faction.” In September 2021, Wang Like, former Director of the PSB and Secretary of the Politics and Legal Affairs Commission of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee, was dismissed from public office and expelled from the CCP for disloyalty, bribery and several other corruption-related allegations, with his case transferred to the prosecutorial authorities ([Central Commission for Discipline Inspection](#), September 22, 2021). Wang started his police career in the 1980s in Liaoning Province, where he worked with Wang Lijun who was later Director of the PSB in Chongqing Municipality and in 2012 was convicted of corruption, attempted defection, as well as involvement in the murder of British businessman Neil Heywood ([Creaders.net](#), October 15, 2012). The indications of the political reason for the prosecution of Wang Like come from his association with Wang Lijun, who reported to former CCP Secretary of Chongqing Bo Xilai, once considered to have been a political rival of Xi Jinping, but who was purged a decade ago, and is currently serving a lifetime prison sentence.

Also implicated in the crackdown on the “Sun faction” were former PSB directors Deng Huilin of Chongqing,

Gong Daoan of Shanghai, and Liu Xinyun of Shanxi province ([Caixin](#), January 17). Reports of these investigations, arrests, and convictions indicate a web of nepotism and corruption that stretched across multiple provinces at the highest levels of the PSB's leadership.

Deng Huilin, the successor of Wang Lijun as Director of the Chongqing PSB, was removed from office in January 2021 accused of using his post to seek profit for others, illegally accepting property, speaking ill of government policies, and engaging in superstitious activities ([China Daily](#), January 4, 2021). Deng pleaded guilty to bribery charges during his trial at the People's Court of Baoding City in Hebei Province ([China.org.cn](#), September 11, 2021).

Gong Daoan, Deputy Mayor of Shanghai and Director of the PSB, was arrested in April 2020 and later charged with abuse of power, corruption, misconduct, and building cliques within the Party ([SCMP](#), February 11, 2021).

Liu Xinyun, the former Deputy Governor of Shanxi Province and Director of the Shanxi Public Security Department, was removed from his position in April 2021 for corruption. Liu was previously head of cyber operations at the MPS in Beijing and led the PRC's implementation of big data, Internet monitoring, and other technologies for policing ([SCMP](#), April 12, 2021). In January, Liu was charged at the Langfang Intermediate Court in Hebei Province with taking advantage of his various posts to assist companies and individuals with business operations in return for accepting cash and gifts worth over 13.3 million yuan (\$2.09 million) between 1998 and 2021 ([China Daily](#), January 6).

The cases against the "Sun faction" of Deng, Gong, and Liu illustrated that the purge is not only about eradicating corruption but also about eliminating threats from "cliques" that if not broken could develop inappropriate levels of political influence. A CCTV documentary on the "Sun faction" noted that "In Sun Lijun's values, grabbing greater political power and obtaining greater economic benefits are two inseparable aspects." ([Central Commission for Discipline Inspection](#), January 15)

The convictions of Sun Lijun and others in the "Sun faction" were preceded in 2018 by the arrest of Meng Hongwei, who was President of INTERPOL from 2016 and previously served as Vice Minister of Public Security in China as well as Director of the Coast Guard. This case was a far higher profile episode than the domestic PSB arrests as Meng was in charge of INTERPOL. Meng confessed to the charges against him in the First Intermediate People's Court of Tianjin and was sentenced to thirteen and a half years of imprisonment. Meng admitted to accepting bribes totaling 14.46 million yuan (\$2.14 million) between 2005 and 2017 ([Global Times](#), June 20, 2019).

There are also indications of political infighting in Meng's case. Chen Yixin, Secretary-General of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CCP Central Committee, is reported to have written that Meng Hongwei, Wang Like, Gong Daoan, Deng Huiling, and Sun Lijun were all "two-faced persons" who seriously violated party discipline ([Global Times](#), October 2, 2021). However, Grace Weng, the wife of Meng Hongwei, said in an interview that the case against her husband was "an example of a political disagreement being turned into a criminal affair" ([AP](#), November 18, 2021).

Conclusion

These cases involved senior police officers who were seemingly involved in substantial graft, but "patient zero" in the prolonged hunt for police corruption and political loyalty during President Xi Jinping's tenure can be considered Wang Lijun, who served under Bo Xilai, as Director of the Chongqing PSB as well as the Deputy Mayor of the city until early 2012.

Wang Lijun was officially arrested on July 22, 2012, although he had been detained since February of that year. Interestingly, officers of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) carried out Wang's arrest, presumably because no other agency could be trusted. In September, Wang stood trial in the Chengdu Municipal Intermediate People's Court. Wang was charged with corruption, abuse of power and attempted defection. Wang admitted all of the charges and said in court that "For the party organization, people and relatives that have cared for me, I want to say here, sincerely: I'm very, very sorry, I've let you down." He was sentenced to only 15 years in prison, which included nine years for bribery, which under the circumstances of the case is shockingly lenient. For the attempted defection alone, it would have been expected that Wang would be executed, but he was clearly treated leniently for his cooperation in the case against his former boss Bo Xilai ([Caixin](#), September 24, 2012).

The example of Chongqing demonstrated how the PSB came to be a part of the criminal problem in the PRC. In 2009, Bo Xilai started the crackdown on organized crime groups in Chongqing that were involved in gambling, prostitution, debt collection, protection, and drug dealing, all of which prospered due to the protection provided by corrupt police officers. The Chongqing crackdown led to the movement of at least 3,000 police officers in an effort to cut their links with organized crime groups. *Guanxi* and relationships between PSB officers became critical for advancement, with promotions and transfers being sold for up to 1.17 million yuan (\$175,000). [4]

In January, the Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) Zhao Leji delivered his work report that stated that his department would investigate major corruption cases that involved political gangs such as Sun Lijun, Deng Huilin, Gong Daoan, Wang Like and Liu Xinyun ([SCIO](#), January 19). Zhao reported that in 2021, 627,000 people had been punished for corruption, including 59,000 in state-owned enterprises, 12,000 in the financial system, and 64,000 in the political and legal system (which presumably includes the PSB) ([Xinhua](#), February 24). The number of corruption cases reported in the PRC remains staggering. This volume of cases cannot only be related to settling political scores, and reported cases illustrate the real corruption that takes place at both the leadership as well as junior levels of officials.

This raises the serious question of whether corruption is endemic in the PRC amongst government officials and especially police officers. Corruption such as that exposed in Chongqing as well as among senior MPS officers is reminiscent of the pre-CCP era and hence undermines public confidence in the Party's ability to represent and serve the people. As a result, corruption is an issue that affects the CCP's survival and especially President Xi's political standing. However, while the dogged pursuit of corruption cases is understandable, the extent of the problem indicates that not only are all the President's men corrupt but many are also disloyal.

Despite the immense issues it creates, the CCP cannot simply eradicate corruption as it is an integral part of the PRC's political system. The absolute power of the CCP can also be considered as a key reason for the

continued endemic corruption in China as criticism is stifled, which prevents official transparency that would expose corruption. This situation can only be changed by a fundamental shift towards liberalism in China that would allow civil society to provide much needed checks and balances on those in power, in both government and big business. In the continued era of Xi Jinping, this is not likely to happen.

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Notes

[1] Guo Xuezhi, *China's Security State*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp.71-73.

[2] *Ibid*, pp.78.

[3] *Ibid*., pp.90-91.

[4] Peng Wang, *The Chinese Mafia: Organised Crime, Corruption, and Extra-Legal Protection*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 144-148.