

Minxin Pei

China Leadership Monitor, Winter 2022 Issue 74

Thursday, December 1, 2022

The political report Chinese leader Xi Jinping delivered to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China represents a notable departure from his report to the 2017 19th Party Congress in its tone and depiction of China's external environment. But in terms of policy, his report presents a policy agenda that summarizes existing policy. The focus on national security in the report largely formalizes recent policy initiatives rather than signaling a radical shift. When we compare the last three political reports, Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Congress and Xi's reports to the 19th and 20th congresses, Xi's report to the 19th Congress was a radical departure from Hu's report to the 18th Congress in both tone and substance, whereas his report to the 20th Congress took on a more combative tone than his report to the 19th Congress but it contained a similar policy agenda. This can be seen in the sections on national defense and Taiwan in the two reports. Taken together, Xi's report to the 20th Party Congress signals a continuation of Xi's current policy agenda in his third term.

The political report delivered by the general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to the quinquennial national congress of the party is many things in one. Typically, the report starts with a summary of the major accomplishments of the party in the preceding five years. This backward-looking section varies in length in each report. In Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Congress in November 2012, the summary section took up only one-seventh of the report (4,000 out of 29,000 characters). Xi Jinping's report to the 19th Congress devoted 5,000 characters (out of 32,300) to the summary section. In his report to the 20th Congress, by comparison, is about 50 percent longer proportionally speaking – 6,800 out of 32,400 characters – most likely because Xi was seeking to bolster his case for a third term, at least rhetorically, with a more stellar record.

The bulk of the political report is, without exception, on the party's policy agenda for the next five years. The first part of this section is a general summary of the party's overall ideological principles and goals, and it may even include a brief account of the party's heroic struggles and achievements in the past (such a summary was included in Xi's report to the 19th Congress but it was dropped in the report to 20th Congress, perhaps due to space constraints). Although few observers will find the language and terminology in this segment of the report interesting, this section actually provides an overall ideological and political framework for the party's policy agenda (it usually specifies a set of guiding principles). Such a framework serves to define, shape, and legitimize specific political and economic strategies. Perhaps the most well-known and enduring framework is that of “the initial stage of socialism” (社会主义的初级阶段), which was advanced by reformist general secretary Zhao Ziyang at the 13th Congress in 1987 to justify the market-oriented reforms. Xi's report to the 20th Congress reiterates this framework, even though he also repeats the competing framework – “new era” (新时代) – that he put forward

at the 19th Congress. On top of these two frameworks, in his report to the 20th Congress Xi also introduces a novel concept, “China’s model of modernization” or “modernization with a Chinese style” (中国式现代化).

After presenting the overall ideological or political framework, the political report sets more specific policy goals for the future. With the exception of presenting long-term “grand” objectives, such as “basically achieving socialist modernization between 2020 and 2035” (a target set in Xi’s report to the 19th Congress and reaffirmed in his report to the 20th Congress), the timeframe for individual targets is not specified. For those trying to divine the intentions and policy of the Chinese leadership, the section on specific policy goals (which usually constitutes two-thirds of the report) can reveal important, albeit often cryptic, clues.

In the space below, we will focus on the sections in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress that may help illuminate the current Chinese leaders’ assessment of the international environment and their formulation of policy objectives concerning national security and Taiwan. We hope to ascertain whether the formulations, terminology, and frequency of keywords represent a radical departure from or rather incremental changes to the two previous political reports (Xi’s report to the 19th Congress and Hu Jintao’s report to the 18th Congress) and to existing policy. This analysis may help us understand the Chinese leadership’s intentions and policy preferences for the remainder of Xi’s tenure in office (which may be extended into the 2030s depending on his health).

Media reports on the text of Xi’s report to the 20th Congress after its release appear to emphasize the departure from the previous political reports in terms of the party’s assessment of the challenges it faces (the external environment portrayed in the current report is much darker).¹ Prominent observers also have called attention to its defiant – even confrontational – tone and stance.² To ascertain whether Xi’s report to the 20th Congress represents a significant or even a radical departure from the two prior reports (Xi’s report to the 19th Congress and Hu’s report to the 18th Congress) and to existing policy, we examine three topics that are relevant to our understanding of the current assessment by Chinese leaders of the external environment, the national security agenda, and policy toward Taiwan. Our analysis shows that the tone of Xi’s report is decidedly more strident and his assessment of the external environment grimmer than those in his report to the 19th Congress. This most likely reflects Xi’s own “fighting spirit” (斗争精神). At a meeting in mid-May on the emphasis of the political report, Xi reportedly instructed the drafting team to “accentuate the fighting spirit” (增强斗争精神).³ However, the policy agenda presented in this report is essentially a summary of the policies that Xi has been advocating or implementing during the last five years. In this sense, it may be fair to argue that, for the most part, Xi’s report represents both a rhetorical escalation and policy continuity.

¹ “Xi Warns of ‘Dangerous Storms’ Facing China,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/10/15/world/china-party-congress-xi-jinping>

² Kevin Rudd, “Xi’s Congress Report Lays Bare an Aggressive and Statist Worldview,” *FT*, October 21, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/8576916d-2cf5-483f-bfe4-2238080a5c70>

³ 张旭东、丁小溪,“推动中华民族伟大复兴号巨轮乘风破浪、扬帆远航——党的二十大报告诞生记,”新华社,October 25, 2022, http://www.news.cn/politics/cpc20/2022-10/26/c_1129079968.htm.

Assessment of the External Environment

Compared with Hu’s report to the 18th Congress and his own report to the 19th Congress, Xi’s report to the 20th Congress is notable for its dark view of the external environment, its focus on security, and its defiant tone. These changes in the report reflect the rapid deterioration of China’s relations with the West, in particular the U.S., since the outbreak of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018. Highlighting the dangerous external environment and challenges lying ahead serve important political purposes. Obviously, mounting external threats can justify Xi’s continuation in office and rally the party behind his proposed policy agenda. Less obvious but no less important, the external threats and pressures will likely provide excuses for China’s subpar economic performance in the years ahead.

Top Chinese leaders since the late 1990s have consistently emphasized the opportunities they faced even as they acknowledged their external challenges. On balance, in their reports to the CPC congress in 1997, 2002, 2007, and 2012, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao both maintained such an optimistic outlook. Jiang’s report to the 15th Congress in September 1997 was perhaps the most positive in assessing the external environment. “On the eve of the new century,” Jiang said, “we face severe challenges, but more importantly we also face unprecedented favorable conditions and great opportunities” (在新世纪将要到来的时刻，我们面对着严峻的挑战，更面对着前所未有的有利条件和大好机遇).⁴ Jiang maintained the same optimistic tone in his report to the 16th Congress in November 2002. “Overall, to our country, the first two decades of the 21st century is an important period of strategic opportunity that we must seize and maximize (综观全局，二十一世纪头二十年，对我国来说，是一个必须紧紧抓住并且可以大有作为的重要战略机遇期).⁵

In his report to the 17th Congress in October 2007, Hu’s assessment was that, even though China faced both unprecedented opportunities and challenges, the “opportunities outweigh challenges” (机遇大于挑战). The party must “seize and utilize this important period of strategic opportunity” (抓住和用好重要战略机遇期).⁶ Hu provided a slightly less positive assessment of China’s external environment in his report to the 18th Congress in November 2012. While claiming that China’s development remains in “an important period of strategic opportunity for great accomplishments” (我国发展仍处于可以大有作为的重要战略机遇期), he warned that the world was very unstable and hegemonism, power politics, and new interventionism were measurably on the rise (霸权主义、强权政治和新干涉主义有所上升).⁷ Hu’s concerns about

⁴ “江泽民在中国共产党第十五次全国代表大会上的报告,”

http://www.ime.cas.cn/djycxwh/djzt/ddsbdzl/201811/t20181116_5180878.html

⁵ “江泽民同志在党的十六大上所作报告全文,” http://laoag.china-consulate.gov.cn/lgxw/200211/t20021118_5106815.htm

⁶ “胡锦涛在党的十七大上的报告,” http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/zggcddsbcqgdbdh/2012-11/06/content_1742192.htm

⁷ “胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告,” http://www.gov.cn/lhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm

a deteriorating external environment were based on the aftermaths of the global financial crisis of 2008, the turmoil in the Middle East following the Arab Spring in 2011, and the incipient shift in America’s China policy toward competition following the Obama administration’s announcement of a “pivot to Asia” in 2010.

Notably, despite a series of ominous international developments, such as the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, subsequent Western sanctions against Russia, and the surprise victory of Donald Trump in 2016, Xi’s report to the 19th Congress in October 2017 reaffirmed China’s positive assessment of the external environment. Although “domestic and external situations are undergoing deep and complex changes,” Xi declared, “the development of our country remains in a period of important strategic opportunity. Our prospects are bright, but the challenges are also severe.”⁸

However, Xi’s assessment of the external environment in his report to the 20th Congress takes a much darker turn. “At present,” he said, “momentous changes of a like not seen in a century are accelerating across the world … a significant shift is taking place in the international balance of power, presenting China with new strategic opportunities in pursuing development. At the same time, however, the once-in-a-century pandemic has had far-reaching effects; a backlash against globalization is rising; and unilateralism and protectionism are mounting. …The world has entered a new period of turbulence and change. … External attempts to suppress and contain China may escalate at any time. Our country has entered a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising. Various “black swan” and “gray rhino” events may occur at any time. We must therefore be more mindful of potential dangers, be prepared to deal with worst-case scenarios, and be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms.”⁹

The change in Xi’s assessment of the external environment in his report to the 20th Congress should be considered a momentous shift. This assessment is widely shared among China’s top leaders, as can be seen in a collection of articles by high-level officials published by the party’s Propaganda Department as supplementary study materials for the 20th Congress. In assessing the external environment, Ding Xuexiang, the former director of the Central Committee’s General Office who has been newly promoted to the Politburo Standing Committee, writes “Hostile forces are doing everything possible to block the historical progression of the great rejuvenation

⁸ The original text is: “国内外形势正在发生深刻复杂变化，我国发展仍处于重要战略机遇期，前景十分光明，挑战也十分严峻。”“习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告，” http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm

⁹ The original Chinese text is: “当前，世界百年未有之大变局加速演进… 国际力量对比深刻调整，我国发展面临新的战略机遇。同时，世纪疫情影响深远，逆全球化思潮抬头，单边主义、保护主义明显上升…世界进入新的动荡变革期…来自外部的打压遏制随时可能升级。我国发展进入战略机遇和风险挑战并存、不确定难预料因素增多的时期，各种“黑天鹅”、“灰犀牛”事件随时可能发生。我们必须增强忧患意识，坚持底线思维，做到居安思危、未雨绸缪，准备经受风高浪急甚至惊涛骇浪的重大考验。”“习近平在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告，” http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm; the official translation of Xi’s report can be found at:

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html

of the Chinese nation.”¹⁰ Xie Fuzhan, president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, identifies America’s shift in its China policy to full containment as one of the four profound changes in China’s external environment.¹¹

At one level, the grim assessment of China’s external environment is an acknowledgment of the obvious. With China’s ties with the West in general, and with the U.S. in particular, spiraling downward since the outbreak of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018, it would be impossible for Xi to project a positive outlook that has little basis in the grim geopolitical reality. At a deeper level, highlighting this shift in China’s external environment and underscoring the risks and dangers facing China also help to make a strong case for maintaining Xi’s centralized leadership.

Focus on Security: Rhetoric vs Substance

Observers outside China have duly noted the high frequency of the appearance of the term, “security” (安全) in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress.¹² When we compare this to Xi’s report to the 19th Congress in 2017, “security” appeared 55 times, far more than it did in Hu’s report to the 18th Congress in 2012. More specifically, in the 20th Congress political report Xi invokes “national security” (国家安全) 18 times (the phrase appeared only four times in Hu’s 2012 report). The emphasis on security in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress is even stronger if we use the frequency of the appearance of the phrases “security” and “national security” (“security” appearing a whopping 91 times and “national security” appearing 29 times).

Although counting the number of times this phrase appears in Xi’s report to the CPC national congress is a simple way to gauge the priority he places on security, perhaps a more productive method to analyze the evolution of Xi’s thinking on security is to perform a more nuanced textual analysis of his reports to the 19th and the 20th congresses.

The higher frequency of the appearance of “national security” in Xi’s report to the 19th Congress can be explained largely by the inclusion of one short section (200 characters) that broadly defines the principal missions of Xi’s new concept of “holistic national security” (such as safeguarding political security and combating “all acts of infiltration, subversion, and sabotage, as well as violent and terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities”). This relatively brief section on its own included 10 references to “national security.”¹³

¹⁰ 丁薛祥, “为全面推进中华民族伟大复兴而团结奋斗,”二十大辅导读本 (北京: 人民出版社, 2022), 25.

¹¹ 谢伏瞻, “深刻把握全面建设社会主义现代化国家面临的形势,”二十大辅导读本 (北京: 人民出版社, 2022), 233.

¹² Merics, “Key Takeaways from Xi’s Report to the Party Congress,” <https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/key-takeaways-xis-report-party-congress>

¹³ This short paragraph is the seventh item (七) 有效维护国家安全 in Section 8 of the report. The official translation of Xi’s report is available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm

The even higher frequency of the use of the term “national security” in the report to the 20th Congress is mainly due to the addition of a stand-alone section (Section 11) on “Modernizing China’s National Security System and Capacity and Safeguarding National Security and Social Stability.” (Xi’s report to the 19th Congress contained no equivalent section.) In this section of 1,138 characters, “national security” appears 18 times and it contains crucial details on Xi’s concept of “holistic national security.” Worth mentioning here is Xi’s definition of China’s “national security system” and “national security capacity” (国家安全体系, 国家安全能力). According to Xi, China’s national security system, under the party’s centralized leadership, encompasses mechanisms of coordination, policy-making, risk monitoring and early warning, and emergency management. Such a system is designed to “strengthen the safeguards for ensuring economic, major infrastructure, financial, cyber, data, biological, resource, nuclear, space, and maritime security. Mechanisms for countering foreign sanctions, interference, and long-arm jurisdiction will be strengthened.”¹⁴

In terms of “national security capacity,” Xi emphasizes building up China’s capacity to safeguard the security of “China’s state power, systems, and ideology... the security of food, energy, and resources as well as key industrial and supply chains.... China’s maritime rights and interests and resolutely defend our country’s sovereignty, security, and development interests.” Such a capacity will enable China to “crack down hard on infiltration, sabotage, subversion, and separatist activities by hostile forces.”¹⁵ In an essay published immediately following the 20th Congress to amplify Xi’s message on “national security capacity,” Guo Shengkun, a newly retired Politburo member and former domestic security chief, presents three categories of “national security capacity.” Topping his list is “political security capacity,” which addresses threats posed by unnamed hostile forces and ideologies. The second category is “security capacity in key domains,” which includes the protection of security in food, energy, key supply and production chains, and China’s overseas interests. The third category is improvement in an awareness of the importance of national security among officials and ordinary people so that China will have “loyal and reliable national security cadres and a people’s line of defense of national security” (国家安全人民防线).¹⁶

If viewed solely in the context of his report to the 20th Congress, Xi’s frequent invocation of “national security” can easily – if not misleadingly – give the impression that he is signaling a dramatic policy shift. However, the substance of Xi’s pronouncements in the report had in fact already been published or communicated widely in the official media as part of a propaganda campaign to promote Xi’s “holistic national security outlook,” which he originally put forth in 2014.¹⁷ Therefore, we should place the frequent references to national security in Xi’s report to

¹⁴ The official translation of Xi’s report to the 20th Congress can be found at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.htm

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 郭声琨, “推进国家安全体系和能力现代化,”二十大辅导读本 (北京: 人民出版社, 2022), 121.

¹⁷ For an official summary of Xi’s “holistic national security outlook,” see 中央宣传部、中央国安办, 总体国家安全观学习纲要 (北京: 人民出版社, 2022)

the 20th Congress in a broader context. Doing so may support a less sensational conclusion – elevation of the national security issue to a higher priority in the party’s policy agenda is an evolutionary process during Xi’s tenure in office even though it represents a significant departure from the Hu Jintao era. If anything, the extensive space devoted to security in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress probably tells us more about the rhetorical emphasis the Chinese leader places on the issue than its substantive content.

Military Modernization and Defense Policy

In terms of space devoted to military modernization and defense policy, Xi’s report to the 20th Congress is similar to Hu’s report to the 18th Congress and Xi’s report to the 19th Congress. However, in terms of substance, Hu presented a much less ambitious agenda for military modernization and national defense. For example, the section on military modernization is called “accelerating the progress of national defense and military modernization,” a rather prosaic expression. He set the goal of achieving “basic mechanization” and making “major progress in informatization” by 2020 (力争到二〇二〇年基本实现机械化，信息化建设取得重大进展). He also reiterated the emphasis on “improving the capabilities for winning a local war under conditions of informatization and fulfilling other military missions” (提高以打赢信息化条件下局部战争能力为核心的完成多样化军事任务能力) and a defense-oriented national defense policy (防御性的国防政策).¹⁸

By comparison, Xi’s report to the 19th Congress in 2017 promoted a more ambitious agenda, as reflected in the title of the section on national defense – “Staying Committed to the Chinese Path of Building Strong Armed Forces and Fully Advancing the Modernization of National Defense and the Military” (坚持走中国特色强军之路，全面推进国防和军队现代化). Besides reiterating Hu’s goal of “basic mechanization by 2020,” Xi announced that China would “make it our mission to see that by 2035, the modernization of our national defense and our forces is basically completed; and that by the mid-21st century our people’s armed forces have been fully transformed into world-class forces” (力争到二〇三五年基本实现国防和军队现代化，到本世纪中叶把人民军队全面建成世界一流军队).¹⁹

The section on national defense in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress, titled “Achieving the Centenary Goal of the People’s Liberation Army and Further Modernizing National Defense and the Military” (实现建军一百年奋斗目标，开创国防和军队现代化新局面), does not depart substantively from what is in the report to the 19th Congress, but with two exceptions. The first is Xi’s new emphasis on achieving the “centenary goal of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on schedule and accelerating the pace of building a world-class military (如期实现建军一百年奋斗目标，加快把人民军队建成世界一流军队). The second is the definition of targeted

¹⁸ “胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告,” http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm

¹⁹ “习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告,” http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm

objectives. While such objectives were relatively vague in the report to the 19th Congress, the report to the 20th Congress is more specific.

The targets laid out in the report to the 19th Congress were: “We will take solid steps to ensure military preparedness for all strategic directions and make progress in combat readiness in both traditional and new security fields. We will develop new combat forces and support forces, conduct military training under combat conditions, strengthen the application of military strength, speed up development of intelligent military, and improve combat capabilities for joint operations based on the network information system and the ability to fight under multi-dimensional conditions. This will enable us to effectively shape our military posture, manage crises, and deter and win wars.”²⁰

By comparison, the objectives identified in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress are both more specific and more ambitious. “We will establish a strong system of strategic deterrence, increase the proportion of new-domain forces with new combat capabilities, speed up the development of unmanned, intelligent combat capabilities, and promote coordinated development and application of the network information system. We will improve the command system for joint operations and enhance our systems and capacity for reconnaissance and early warning, joint strikes, battlefield support, and integrated logistics support. We will intensify military training under combat conditions, laying emphasis on joint training, force-on-force training, and high-tech training. We will become more adept at deploying our military forces on a regular basis and in diversified ways, and our military will remain both steadfast and flexible as it carries out its operations. This will enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts, and win local wars.”²¹ Especially worth noting is the inclusion of “strategic deterrence” (most likely referring to China’s ongoing nuclear build-up), “new-domain forces” (perhaps a reference to cyber, space, and information warfare), and “unmanned, intelligent combat capabilities” (a reference to drones and AI-enabled military capabilities).

If Xi’s report to the 20th Congress is read on its own, it is easy to get the impression that he is putting forward a far more ambitious agenda for military modernization. But if it is read in the context of his report to the 19th Congress as well as recent Chinese investments and progress in the new capabilities referenced in his report, the more reasonable conclusion is that his policy agenda on national defense and military modernization represents a continuation of the policy agenda laid out in 2017, albeit infused with greater urgency given the grim external environment.

²⁰ The Chinese text is “扎实做好各战略方向军事斗争准备，统筹推进传统安全领域和新型安全领域军事斗争准备，发展新型作战力量和保障力量，开展实战化军事训练，加强军事力量运用，加快军事智能化发展，提高基于网络信息体系的联合作战能力、全域作战能力，有效塑造态势、管控危机、遏制战争、打赢战争，” in 习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm

²¹ The Chinese text is “打造强大战略威慑力量体系，增加新域新质作战力量比重，加快无人智能作战力量发展，统筹网络信息体系建设运用。优化联合作战指挥体系，推进侦察预警、联合打击、战场支撑、综合保障体系和能力建设。深入推进实战化军事训练，深化联合训练、对抗训练、科技练兵。加强军事力量常态化多样化运用，坚定灵活开展军事斗争，塑造安全态势，管控危机冲突，打赢局部战争，”习近平在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm

China has already been doing all the things Xi says it should do in his report to the 20th Congress.

The Taiwan Issue

The treatment of the Taiwan issue in Xi's report to the 20th Congress also represents an incremental change, not a dramatic departure, from his report to the 19th Congress. To be sure, Xi's formulation of China's position on Taiwan in his report to the 19th Congress represents a slightly more proactive stance than that in Hu's report to the 18th Congress. Whereas Hu defined resolution of the Taiwan issue as an “unstoppable historical process” (不可阻挡的历史进程), Xi pledged to “advance the process toward the peaceful reunification of China” (推进祖国和平统一进程) in his report to the 19th Congress. In his report to the 20th Congress, Xi not only reaffirms the party's commitment to reunification but he also assigns it greater political importance and historical inevitability, declaring, “Resolving the Taiwan question and realizing China's complete reunification is, for the Party, a historic mission, and an unshakable commitment. It is also ... a natural requirement for realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. We will implement our Party's overall policy for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era, maintain the initiative and the ability to steer in cross-Straits relations, and unwaveringly advance the cause of national reunification.”²²

What is notable here is the elevation of the resolution of the Taiwan issue to the status of a “natural requirement for realizing the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” although what this means exactly is open to interpretation. Another noteworthy reference is that to the “Party's overall policy for resolving the Taiwan question in the new era” (新时代党解决台湾问题的总体方略). The official translation does not fully capture the weight of the meaning of the phrase in Chinese. A more appropriate translation should be “overall strategy for resolving the Taiwan question in the era,” rather than “overall policy.”

Compared with the pronouncements on Taiwan in Hu's report to the 18th Congress and in Xi's report to the 19th Congress, it is again easy to get the impression that Xi may have redefined the status of the Taiwan issue (instead of treating the status of Taiwan as largely irrelevant to China's modernization, reunification with it now becomes an inseparable part of China's rise). The reference to an “overall policy... in the new era” also appears to imply a new strategy.

However, this “overall policy,” which appeared for the first time in the CPC's resolution on history in November 2021, seems to consist of a series of concepts and policy proposals that Xi

²² The Chinese text is “解决台湾问题、实现祖国完全统一，是党矢志不渝的历史任务...是实现中华民族伟大复兴的必然要求。坚持贯彻新时代党解决台湾问题的总体方略，牢牢把握两岸关系主导权和主动权，坚定不移推进祖国统一大业。”习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm

has recently announced.²³ Elevating Xi’s pronouncements to the status of an “overall policy” should not be taken as evidence of the existence of a well-conceived, coherent, and comprehensive strategy. Perhaps the best summary of this “overall policy” can be found in an essay written by Liu Jieyi, director of the Taiwan Affairs Office under the State Council and China’s most authoritative spokesman on Taiwan. Published as part of the supplementary study materials for the 20th Congress, Liu’s essay lists ten points in this “overall policy.” A close examination of these ten points reveals that there is literally nothing new among them.²⁴

If we treat the “overall policy in the new era” as a relabeling exercise rather than a fundamental altering of the substance of Beijing’s pre-existing Taiwan policy, we may be encouraged to find more continuity in the most consequential portion of the section on Taiwan among the three political reports – Hu’s to the 18th Congress and Xi’s to the 19th and 20th congresses. This is the concluding section on Taiwan where the party’s policy on Taiwan is either stated or reiterated. In Hu’s report in 2012, he declared “We resolutely oppose any separatist attempt for Taiwan independence. The Chinese people will never allow anyone or any force to separate Taiwan from the motherland by any means. Any separatist attempt for Taiwan independence, which undermines the common interests of the compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Straits, is doomed to fail.”²⁵

The section on Taiwan in Xi’s report to the 19th Congress ended more or less on the same note. He said, “We have the resolve, the confidence, and the ability to defeat separatist attempts for ‘Taiwan independence; in any form. We will never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from

²³ The resolution describes this “overall policy” as “习近平同志就对台工作提出一系列重要理念、重大政策主张，形成新时代党解决台湾问题的总体方略。”中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议,” http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-11/16/content_5651269.htm

²⁴ These ten points are: (1) Maintaining the party center’s unified leadership on Taiwan, (2) Advancing national reunification in the process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, (3) Resolving the Taiwan question on the basis of the development and progress of the motherland, (4) Maintaining the fundamental principle of “peaceful reunification and one-country, two systems,” (5) Maintaining the “One China principle and the ‘92 consensus,” (6) Advancing the peaceful and integrative development of cross-strait relations, (7) Seeking to unite with Taiwan compatriots and to win the hearts and minds of the people of Taiwan, (8) Persisting in smashing the attempts to seek “Taiwanese independence,” (9) Opposing the intervention of external forces, and (10) Never committing to renouncing the use of force. 刘结一，“坚持贯彻新时代党解决台湾问题的总方略,” 二十大辅导读本（北京：人民出版社，2022），512–519.

²⁵ The Chinese text is “我们坚决反对“台独”分裂图谋。中国人民绝不允许任何人任何势力以任何方式把台湾从祖国分割出去。‘台独’分裂行径损害两岸同胞共同利益，必然走向彻底失败。”胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告，

http://www.gov.cn/lndh/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm

China!”²⁶ Xi similarly seeks to strike a balance between underscoring China’s resolve and maintaining its long-standing preference for a peaceful resolution in his report to the 20th Congress. Perhaps the only difference is a stronger emphasis on “the interference by outside forces” (a thinly veiled reference to the U.S.), declaring “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.”²⁷

To be sure, we should be wary of taking at face value Xi’s pronouncements on Taiwan because he is unlikely to advertise a plan to reunify Taiwan by military means in the very near future. But if we compare treatment of the Taiwan issue in the three political reports since 2012, it seems reasonable to argue that, although there is an obvious rhetorical shift in Xi’s reports, there is more substantive continuity than many believe.

Concluding Thoughts

Xi Jinping’s report to the 20th Congress should be read at two different levels, one rhetorical and the other substantive. At the rhetorical level, the tone of the report is doubtlessly more combative than that in either his report to the 19th Congress or in Hu Jintao’s report to the 18th Congress. His portrayal of the world is much darker as well. Yet, in terms of policy, Xi’s report to the 20th Congress represents a continuity in the policy agenda laid out in his report to the 19th Congress, with the exception of a greater emphasis on security. Even in the areas of national security, defense policy, and Taiwan, the formulations and language used in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress are essentially the same as those used in his recent speeches. On this basis, we may conclude that the foreign policy agenda presented in Xi’s report to the 20th Congress is, for the most part, a summary of the policies he has adopted in recent years instead of a new policy agenda.

The combination of combative rhetoric and continuity of existing policy serves Xi well politically. On the one hand, he is seeking to rally the party around him, with warnings of growing external threats to its survival and China’s rise. On the other hand, reaffirming his existing policy agenda helps justify its correctness and pre-empt any potential criticisms. To the outside world concerned with the direction of Chinese foreign policy in the coming years,

26 The Chinese text is “我们有坚定的意志、充分的信心、足够的能力挫败任何形式的“台独”分裂图谋。我们绝不允许任何人、任何组织、任何政党、在任何时候、以任何形式、把任何一块中国领土从中国分裂出去!” 习近平在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告, http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm

27 The Chinese text is “我们坚持以最大诚意、尽最大努力争取和平统一的前景，但决不承诺放弃使用武力，保留采取一切必要措施的选项，这针对的是外部势力干涉和极少数‘台独’分裂分子及其分裂活动，绝非针对广大台湾同胞。” 习近平在中国共产党第二十次全国代表大会上的报告, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm

perhaps the most important takeaway from Xi's report to the 20th Congress is that China's current policy will unlikely change.

About the Contributor

Minxin Pei, editor of China Leadership Monitor, is Tom and Margot Pritzker '72 Professor of Government at Claremont McKenna College. He is also non-resident senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. Pei has published in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *Project Syndicate*, *Nikkei Asian Review*, and many scholarly journals and edited volumes. Pei formerly was senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1999–2009) and assistant professor of politics at Princeton University (1992–1998). He was the Library of Congress Chair on U.S.-China Relations from January to August 2019.

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to thank Chris Buckley for providing the “Supplementary Study Materials on the 20th Congress.”

Photo Credit: Xi Jinping giving his speech at the 20th Congress, China News Service, CC BY 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons