

DECODING XI JINPING'S SPEECH: CHINA'S CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM WILL MARK THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

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On 16 October, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a two-hour speech at the opening of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC). From national security to global economic integration, the address covered many issues related to China's political and economic progress since 2017, new problems, and prospects for a modernized China. One of the interesting statements in the speech was that Jinping strongly opposed Cold War politics and all forms of hegemony associated with this era, rejecting the idea of power politics, and favoring a new vision for China as a benign force. For many observers, such remarks will most likely remain on paper. China's enormous economic growth over the last two decades paved the way for an outwardly oriented China, as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and plans for a more sophisticated and modernized army (PLA) reveal. In this regard, two aspects of the speech deserve a close read: foreign policy priorities and clues about the existing international order. Both seem to characterize China as a "cautious optimist" actor in the global setting.

Burak Elmali*

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* Burak Elmali is a Deputy Researcher at TRT World Research Centre.
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China as the "Cautious" Actor

First, Xi's speech is noteworthy because it gives significant insights into China's national security concerns and determined patterns of assertiveness vis-à-vis the Taiwan question in the upcoming period. Considering Beijing's strong reaction against Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei in August 2022, the speech should be taken seriously as it frames the issue as a "historic mission" with an "unshakable commitment."¹ The concept of "the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," frequently used in the speech, signifies the strategic combination of nationalist sentiments and some realpolitik considerations. It is evident that Beijing, which dispatched warships and military aircraft to the Taiwan Strait as a show of force after Pelosi's visit, would make a more proactive counter-move against any possible American behavior perceived as interference in China's internal affairs.²

Nevertheless, the speaker implies that a satisfactory outcome in the Taiwan issue is not an end in itself but only a single but significant part of a broader foreign policy strategy. What China seeks to achieve is, therefore, to establish a regional balance in its favor and to preserve it at any cost, a long-term goal that cannot be limited to Taiwan. The point behind the frequent referral to the Taiwan issue in the speech is that it can effectively be a stepping-stone for China to become a more potent power pursuing regional hegemony. This aspect may explain Beijing's

1) Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 25 October 2022. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html

2) David Rising, "China's Response to Pelosi Visit a Sign of Future Intentions," AP, 19 August 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-beijing-congress-8857910a1e44cefa70bc4dfd184ef880>

firm opposition to any possible external interference with this “delicate” question which has an unquestionable vitality in the eyes of Chinese policymakers when formulating future strategies. To put it more differently, Beijing gives an apparent response to those who compare its overt sensitivity about Taiwan to the situation in Ukraine by framing the two as entirely different.³

Another point underscored in the speech was on military modernization, a critical issue stated at the 19th Congress as well. Reforming the PLA might be one of the lessons China has learned by examining the Russian army's problems in the Ukraine War.⁴ In the speech, the emphasis is mainly placed on the technical and organizational development of the armed forces, the Military-Party unity, and even the Party's absolute leadership over the army. Together with these reforms and control over the military, Xi Jinping iterated the very necessity of being capable of organizing joint military operations and joint training of different branches within the PLA, a vital necessity for China in case of a major military operation.

The speech also mentioned the “strategic planning for running the armed forces in accordance with the law and improvement of the Chinese system for law-based administration of military affairs,” a point related to the acute corruption problem within many branches of the PLA. Therefore, the modernization of the army seems to be a wider project expected to include the procurement of cutting-edge military equipment and the training of top commanders.

Chinese Optimism Regarding Globalization

Aside from crucial realpolitik considerations of national and regional security, Xi offered some insights about his continued optimism and willingness to pursue the pace of globalization. The speech clearly emphasized that China would continue adhering to the UN Charter as a set of international norms, liberalizing trade through the WTO, and expanding multilateralism and cooperation by BRICS, APEC, and SCO. Such an orientation is framed in the context that China would not seek any form of hegemony in the future, nor does it pursue expansionism.

Nevertheless, one can better understand the speech through the prism of the U.S. National Security Report 2022. In this document, the PRC is referred to as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly,

3) “Chinese Foreign Minister: Taiwan is ‘Not Ukraine’,” RadioFreeEurope, 23 February 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-taiwan-not-ukraine/31718237.html>

4) TRT World Research Center, “Understanding China's Position Towards the War in Ukraine: Lessons for a ‘Superpower to-be’,” (5 May 2022). <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/featured/understanding-chinas-position-towards-the-war-in-ukraine-lessons-for-a-superpower-to-be/>

the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”⁵ It also asserted that the PRC “has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power.” Such wariness towards China’s rise builds on Trump’s approach. Unlike the successive U.S. administrations since Bush Senior, Trump did not share the post-Cold War liberal optimism, waging substantial “trade wars” against Beijing in 2018.

Xi’s emphasis on the Chinese opposition to protectionism, unilateralism, and sanctions can be read as an alluded reference to the new U.S. policy shift from liberal engagement to economic and political containment. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg had expressed grave concerns⁶ over China when Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China (NPC), expressed views against the NATO enlargement a few months ago.⁷ Not surprisingly, in the NATO Strategic Concept 2022, it is stated that China, which pursues its strategic alliance with Russia, is the primary challenger to the Euro-Atlantic security system, which makes the prospects for containment (instead of engagement) more adequate.⁸ Therefore, the Western coverage and threat perception vis-à-vis China remain at odds with what Xi Jinping tried to convey in the speech.

Over the last two decades, China has been very good at using the international system for its economic interests and has become more affluent. Paradoxically, it used the “liberal” characteristics of the international order by integrating into the global markets while disregarding the liberal political components domestically. As China’s economic rise continues, it will allocate budgets to other fields, especially the military. Although the speech rejects all forms of hegemonic aspirations, Taiwan seems to be the most critical stepping-stone for its unstated quest for regional hegemony.

Such a projection could well materialize given the emphasis on national security concerns, military modernization, and national rejuvenation in Xi Jinping’s address. A gap tends to exist between discourse and practice, words and actions, and framing and intentions. The main task confronting analysts is to fill these gaps with causal connections, concrete examples, and different analytical perspectives.

5) U.S. Department of Defense, "National Defense Strategy," (October 2022).
<https://www.defense.gov/National-Defense-Strategy/>

6) "Exclusive NATO Chief Stoltenberg Calls China a Security Challenge," Reuters, 21 September 2022.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-nato-chief-stoltenberg-calls-china-security-challenge-2022-09-21/>

7) Shargh, "Russia, China to Fight Together Against NATO Expansion," 10 September 2022.
<https://www.sharghdaily.com/Section-news-3/855661-russia-china-to-fight-together-against-nato-expansion>

8) NATO, "NATO Strategic Concept 2022," (June 2022).
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-factsheet-strategic-concept-en.pdf