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Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy in Light of the 20th Party Congress

By Tiong Wei Jie

SYNOPSIS

China's top legislature had voted unanimously for Xi Jinping to assume an unprecedented third term as state president. What will China's foreign policy be like over the next five years? President Xi's report to the 20th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022 provides some indicators.

COMMENTARY

Chinese politics has often been labelled as a "black box", a reference to the lack of transparency over how key political decisions are arrived at. President Xi Jinping's election as China's president for another term has further ignited [debates](#) about the ramifications of his increasingly personalized rule.

One aspect which must intrigue international observers is the trajectory of Xi's foreign policy as China's political and economic clout continue to grow. A recent [study](#) by the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute found that China is the most influential economic and political-strategic power in Southeast Asia.

With Xi's consolidation of political power, some analysts have [opined](#) that China's political system has entered new and unpredictable territory, and that Beijing may become increasingly unpredictable in the international arena. These opinions neglected the fact that China's foreign policies have largely conformed with the directions stated in Xi's report to the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party thus far. On the contrary, therefore, Beijing could be considered predictable, at least in the broad sense.

Beijing's Foreign Policy Arising from Xi's Report

President Xi's full report to the 20th Party Congress is lengthy. It is illuminating to analyse its third segment, which deals with the "[main objectives and tasks](#)" for the next five years, focusing on points related to Chinese foreign policy.

Xi's first point is that the party-state should promote "high-quality economic development" and "achieve greater self-reliance and strength in science and technology". This objective could explain Beijing's recent attempts to shore up partnerships with other countries despite ideological differences and territorial disputes with some of them.

For Beijing, reinvigorating China's economy after the massive disruptions caused by three years of its draconian zero-COVID policy is no easy task. According to an official statement issued after Beijing's Central Economic Work Conference held in Beijing last December, China faces [three-fold pressures](#) in the form of contracting demand, supply shocks and weakened expectations.

To surmount these challenges, Xi's China has gone on a charm offensive around the globe, with delegations visiting countries such as Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Hungary, France and Russia. Xi himself has held talks with the leaders of Vietnam and the Philippines.

In these meetings, deepening economic cooperation was high on the agenda, while longstanding territorial disputes were [toned down](#). Amid US attempts to build a [technological alliance](#) aimed at limiting China's chip advancement, President Xi has repeatedly called on the Chinese people to be technologically self-reliant.

But given the extensiveness of supply chains, from design to manufacturing to assembling, the path to high-tech self-sufficiency would take a long time, possibly more than a decade. In the meantime, therefore, China's strategy is to mitigate the impact of Washington-led curbs by shoring up its supply-chain partnerships with advanced economies such as [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#), despite turbulent relations with the latter at times.

Secondly, the aforementioned efforts to secure partnerships on all fronts is also related to Xi's objective to "further increase China's international standing" and to enable "China to play a greater role in global governance". On these, Beijing has, throughout the past decade, spearheaded multilateral bodies such as (1) BRICS, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, which have agreed to admit new members; (2) the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB); and (3) the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Importantly, it has implemented the sprawling Belt and Road Initiative, which has seen [151 countries and 32 international organisations](#) signing cooperation and project agreements under its ambit. More recently, on 21 February, Beijing released its Global Security Initiative [concept paper](#) in which President Xi called for solidarity to address complex security challenges and to improve global security governance.

Beijing had also announced its Global Development Initiative in September 2022. This [signalled](#) Beijing's intent to be a global leader in development cooperation, which ties

in with Xi's stated aim at the 20th Congress. It is significant that Southeast Asian countries are "[unanimous](#)" in their support of the initiative.

Lastly, President Xi aimed to "further consolidate national security" and to "fulfil the goals for the centenary of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 2027". Of all national security issues, Taiwan was probably top of the concerns. Following the 20th Congress, China visibly stepped up its military assertiveness vis-a-vis Taiwan. One day last December saw [43 warplanes](#) crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait separating the mainland and Taiwan in a show of force.

Beijing's increased efforts at consolidating national security came after the passing of a US defence spending legislation which would increase military assistance for Taiwan; a move which Beijing condemned. On the PLA's goals for its centenary, observers should expect that it will continue to strengthen capability, including in emerging critical security domains such as outer space and cyber space.

On top of modernising its weaponry, using smart technologies and artificial intelligence, a PLA [white paper](#) also called on the navy to focus more on "open seas protection" and not just "offshore waters defence". This means strengthening its maritime projection capability. As the executive officer of China's newest aircraft carrier CNS Fujian [highlighted](#), the vessel's ongoing trials will "contribute to the realisation of the centenary goals of the PLA". Overall, Beijing's increased posturing in the South and East China Sea has caused [consternation](#) among regional states with competing claims.

Xi's Report: Limits and Significance

If a more nuanced view of Chinese foreign policy is needed, there are undoubtedly other aspects that observers should pay attention to, such as the influence of subnational actors, which include China's local governments and state-owned enterprise leaders, especially in China's economic relations. They have, from time to time, demonstrated great agency in China's foreign relations.

These central-local dynamics would not be apparent if one were to only look at Xi's report to the party congress. Indeed, the ancient Chinese proverb "the mountains are high, and the emperor is far away" remains valid. While that may be true, there are compelling reasons why President Xi's report to the 20th Party Congress should be carefully studied to understand the general thrust of China's foreign policy.

This is because over the past decade, Xi had institutionalized the Central Foreign Affairs Commission and many '[Leading Small Groups](#)' related to foreign policy such as the Finance and Economy Leading Small Group, some of which he personally chairs. Furthermore, with his election to a third term, Xi's power sweep is complete and the most influential positions in the party-state are now stacked with his allies.

Given the heavy centralisation of political control, expect Xi's bureaucracy to allocate substantial effort to meet the main objectives and tasks he has set for the party, which his unprecedented third term will be judged by. Indeed, the importance of Xi's report was clearly reiterated by new Chinese Premier Li Qiang in his first press conference since taking over from Li Keqiang. On a query regarding the goals and priorities of the

new government, Li Qiang highlighted that Xi's report to the 20th Party Congress "provided clear answers" regarding China's strategic directions for the next five years and that his government would focus on delivering the blueprint set out in that party report.

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