



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# Why China Will Play It Safe

## Xi Would Prefer Détente—Not War—With America

**BY CHRISTOPHER K. JOHNSON**

**November 14, 2022**

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At a time of growing tension between Beijing and Washington, China's 20th Party Congress in October unsettled many outside observers. During the proceedings, not only did Chinese President Xi Jinping stack China's all-important Politburo Standing Committee with loyalists and secure a third term in office; he also painted his darkest picture yet of China's external threats. Xi called for further increasing the quantity and quality of China's already accelerating defense production. And he appointed a mix of protégés and skilled technocrats to the full Politburo to oversee China's response to the challenge.

So far, Beijing has withheld escalatory responses that would amount to direct economic warfare against the United States, such as disrupting crucial supply chains of rare-earth metals or using untested Chinese regulatory tools such as its "Unreliable Entity List" and the Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law, which could penalize foreign companies simply for complying with

U.S. regulations. But to many analysts, Xi's recent moves are a sign of worse to come. Now that Xi is firmly ensconced in his third term, some China observers argue that he could move to retake Taiwan in the next few years, provoking a full-fledged war between the world's two most powerful states.

But the new Politburo is not a war cabinet. Although there is no question that China's leadership has grown more prickly and assertive, predictions in the wake of the congress that Beijing could soon launch a military provocation or that Xi will dramatically rein in free-market capitalism in favor of a return to statism are wrong. For all their loyalty to Xi, the party's new leaders are mostly measured technocrats. Xi has certainly added many close allies, but they also have strong connections to China's private economy and are unlikely to be pure sycophants. Rather than planning for an aggressive, closed, and highly personalistic China, the United States should expect Beijing to continue to govern in a stable and predictable manner, if only because China is facing major challenges that make the Politburo crave stability.

### **THE SPIRIT OF STRUGGLE**

The 20th Party Congress is not the first time Xi has spoken about the world in a menacing tone. In May 2019, U.S. talks with China over President Donald Trump's tariffs collapsed in Washington. Shortly after, Xi traveled to Jiangxi Province on a visit full of symbolism: Jiangxi was the launch pad for the Chinese Communist Party's fabled Long March in 1934, when CCP forces successfully retreated from advancing Chinese nationalists, regrouped, and then won. "We are now embarking on a new Long March," Xi said to a cheering crowd at the Long March memorial site, "and we must start all over again." He doubled down in a Politburo meeting a year later, declaring that China was fighting a "protracted war" against the United States, in a

throwback to *On Protracted War*, Mao Zedong's 1938 book about defeating a superior foreign enemy.

Yet Xi did not completely upend Chinese doctrine on those occasions. In each instance, he held fast to the judgment that stability and economic growth continued to be the dominant global trends. By declaring that “peace and development remain the themes of the era,” he parroted a phrase first coined by Deng Xiaoping—the father of China's post-Mao reforms. He also said China was enjoying “a period of strategic opportunity”: an axiom introduced by Jiang Zemin, Deng's successor and another market-oriented reformist. The idea underlying both concepts is that China enjoys a benign, perhaps even welcoming, global geopolitical climate. This assessment forestalled Chinese military adventurism aimed at reshaping East Asia's balance of power and instead incentivized the country's policymakers to focus on economic growth. Both phrases appeared again in critical CCP documents from April and June 2022, reaffirming their canonical standing in party dogma.

That continuity, however, did not stop Xi from changing Chinese foreign policy. Already in November 2014, he gave a speech in which he effectively broke with Deng's injunction that China should keep a low international profile, even though Xi's immediate predecessor—Hu Jintao—had offered a full-throated defense of that approach just a few years earlier. Indeed, Xi made it clear that he had little regard for most of his various predecessors' decisions. In a party resolution passed in November 2021, Xi condemned the rampant corruption and ideological laxity under their rule, and he put his own ideological contribution on par with Mao's while downgrading Deng's. This boosting of Xi's own thoughts at the expense of his predecessors' continued in the run-up to the party congress. In July 2022, a prominent party theoretician penned an article in the CCP's flagship *People's*

*Daily* extolling Mao's and Xi's theoretical achievements while making no mention of Deng, Jiang, or Hu.

This diminution campaign cleared the way for Xi to finally excise both phrases—"peace and development" and "strategic opportunity"—from his political report to the 20th Party Congress. It is unclear exactly why they were removed, but the West's galvanized response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Politburo's conclusion that the Biden administration is at least as aggressive toward China as the Trump administration was probably made a difference. These two factors are also part of the reason why Xi has made multiple references to "the spirit of struggle," a deliberate callback to Maoist rhetoric used when China faced both a hostile West after the Korean War and an antagonistic Moscow after the Sino-Soviet split. Although language about peace, development, and strategic opportunities all appear in the political report, the terms are used in isolation and counterbalanced with references to "risks," "challenges," and "hegemonic bullying." Xi almost directly attacked the United States for its tariffs and criticisms, saying China opposes "building walls and fortifications," "decoupling and breaking links," and "unilateral sanctions and extreme pressure."

So far, the main policy implication of Xi's stiff language has been a campaign to build domestic industrial strength. At the congress, Xi sketched out his plans to create a "fortress economy" that is self-sufficient in food, energy, and core technologies, such as semiconductors and advanced manufacturing. Xi also said he hopes to build supply chains that are safer from Washington's interference. He seems similarly committed to increasing China's military strength abroad and the regime's security at home. In the 20th Party Congress report, his "comprehensive national security concept" had its own standalone section, and mentions of "national security" were up

60 percent over the last report, in 2017. Xi also subtly declared that China must improve its “strategic deterrence”: a likely nod to China’s August 2021 test of a hypersonic glide vehicle—and an indication that China will substantially expand its nuclear force.

Economic development retained its spot as China’s “top priority” in the report. But Xi’s new admonition to “ensure both development and security” puts security on nearly equal footing, potentially creating more friction with Washington. Xi’s proclaimed desire to promote a unique “Chinese-style of modernization” for developing countries might spark fears that China’s amorphous Global Development and Global Security Initiatives are in fact nefarious joint campaigns to directly challenge the Western international order. Equating development and security could also heighten U.S. concerns about “civil-military fusion” in China’s economy—fears that have already prompted U.S. President Joe Biden to implement a virtual ban on exporting high-end semiconductors to China. If Xi merges departments focused on development and national security at China’s next legislative session—or creates a new structure to improve coordination and cooperation between them—an increase in Chinese-U.S. tensions would become virtually certain.

### **STEADY AS SHE GOES**

In many ways, Xi’s new leadership team matches his protectionist and militaristic language. Several of the new Politburo members are techno-nationalists with expertise in important state-led scientific endeavors that have advanced China’s industrial prowess; they include a nuclear engineer, an expert in material sciences, and four officials with experience in Chinese defense firms. In the security realm, Chen Wenqing is the first former head of China’s civilian foreign intelligence arm to sit on the Politburo. He is joined on the CCP Secretariat—the Politburo’s executive body—by both China’s top cop and a career police officer turned party disciplinarian,

creating the largest contingent of security officials on the Secretariat in recent memory. Xi's new chief uniformed officer and his presumptive next defense minister have both overseen weapons development, highlighting the CCP's emphasis on continually upgrading China's capabilities. Xi's revamped high command also has two officers who saw action in China's border wars with Vietnam and a third who served extensively in Chinese army units near Taiwan.

Given these appointments, it is understandable why many analysts believe China is preparing to upend the liberal order—perhaps even through violence. Major news outlets across the globe said Xi's new lineup, especially in the military, proves he is itching for war. But such narratives are overhyped. Xi's all-loyalist Politburo is not designed for near-term conflict with Taiwan (or any other state) but rather to “harden” China's system in case war becomes unavoidable. Xi kept an aging top general on the Politburo, for example, because he is a fellow CCP blue blood who can be trusted to enforce Xi's political grip on the military, not because he fought in China's disastrous war with Vietnam 40 years ago. Likewise, Xi promoted defense specialists to the Politburo because they achieved previously unattainable technological breakthroughs, such as landing rovers on the moon, rather than for their weapons-making prowess. And despite the new language, Xi's work report still balanced calls for a “fortress economy” with language supporting markets, suggesting he will govern with a precautionary approach instead of marching to war.

The idea that Xi's new economic team is an incompetent and sycophantic group of statisticians, also popular among China observers, is similarly off base. The officials' career paths alone belie that caricature. China's next premier, Li Qiang, has led all three of China's top east coast economies and maintains good relations with private-sector entrepreneurs. His stewardship of the

wrenching Shanghai lockdown raised reasonable questions about whether loyally following Xi will outweigh his pro-market instincts, but that is nothing new for China: outgoing Premier Li Keqiang, an unquestioned reformist, earned a similar black mark for toeing the party line amid controversies earlier in his career. Li Qiang's likely economic deputy—Ding Xuexiang—is more of a cipher, but he hails from the financial capital of Shanghai and will be attuned to the markets. As Xi's longtime chief of staff, Ding knows how to please his boss, but he is also experienced at operating China's government to address various problems. Finally, He Lifeng—assumed to be the economy's new operational manager—has substantial experience in several of China's market-driven special economic zones.

The Biden administration will need to understand that China's new leaders are not just warmongering statisticians if it wants to successfully handle an unbound Xi. Right now, however, it may not. On Taiwan, the administration has touted an ever-shrinking timeline for possible Chinese military action, and it has alleged that the Chinese government is impatient about retaking the island. This messaging may be deliberately alarmist—part of an attempt to tell Beijing that the United States is ready and watching, thereby deterring an attack. But it could create a self-fulfilling prophecy if the resulting support to Taipei hollows out Washington's official “one China” policy—which recognizes the Chinese position that Taiwan is a part of China and that the mainland is the sole legal government of China—and in turn crosses Beijing's fundamental redline. Biden officials are more circumspect in describing Xi's new economic team, but their framing of the Chinese-U.S. rivalry as a competition of economic and governance systems implies that they expect China's model will ultimately fail—a perspective that earns them few friends in Beijing.

That is not to say Xi's approach and his new team are the right choices for China or that they will inevitably succeed. And regardless, Biden must understand that Xi's power equals that of Mao—except during a time when China is far more economically powerful and globally consequential. China's president is a ruthless and tenacious leader, full of ambitions that will not be subordinated by norms: something the reformist Hu Jintao's embarrassing and forced exit from the congress meeting clearly illustrated. By appointing a mix of loyal protégés and accomplished technocrats to the Politburo, Xi has also made it clear that he is a man in a hurry, pursuing fast results. He could act rashly and catch Washington off guard.

But that does not mean Xi is itching for a fight. In fact, Xi's very sense that China faces substantial challenges may encourage him to lower bilateral tensions. Ding, a leading Politburo member, unwittingly hinted as much in a lengthy early November article in the *People's Daily*, where he forcefully catalogued China's many challenges and arduous tasks over the next five years (and beyond) and offered a controversial Mao formulation as the right response. It was, after all, Mao who first lowered tensions with Washington in order to more easily achieve many of his objectives. Xi is not looking for a rapprochement, but he might like some breathing room. Early rumblings that Biden and Xi could hold a lengthy meeting with the trappings of traditional modern summits, where both sides use the gathering to announce commercial deals and other deliverable results, certainly suggested as much. The real question is whether Biden wants to—or can—seize Beijing's apparent interest in a détente to pump the brakes on the relationship's downward spiral.

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