



The 19th Party Congress and Chinese Foreign Policy

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Summary: Comparing Xi Jinping's report at the 19th Party Congress to earlier such documents provides an excellent indicator of continuities and recent changes in Chinese foreign policy.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congresses are usually not occasions for presenting the details of the country's foreign policy. Such details usually are revealed as part of the major work report on state policies presented during the annual gatherings of the National People's Congress (NPC), the country's national legislative body, held during the spring following every party congress. Instead, most of the news-making events that take place at the CCP's national party congresses focus on party leadership changes and general statements of national strategic orientation applicable to many policy realms.

That said, since at least the advent of the reform era in the late 1970s, CCP congresses have invariably addressed three general areas of direct or indirect relevance to foreign policy: 1) the Chinese leadership's assessment of the overall features of the global and Asian diplomatic, economic, and security environments; 2) China's basic national development goals of direct relevance to foreign policy; and 3) the country's major foreign policy initiatives and priorities.

Together, these serve as guidelines for more detailed presentations of Chinese foreign policy that take place during the NPC and various party and state meetings. Hence, variations and continuities in the themes struck in each of these areas during successive party congresses can provide an excellent indicator of both the enduring foundations and the new departures occurring in China's foreign policy over time. Based on an examination of relevant statements from the 16th–18th party congresses (held in 2002, 2007, and 2012 respectively), as well as geopolitical developments that have been taking place since 2012, one can obtain a reasonably reliable impression of what to expect regarding Chinese foreign policy statements at the upcoming 19th Party Congress due to convene on October 18, 2017.

Key Global and Regional Conditions for Chinese Foreign Policy

The 19th Party Congress will without a doubt stress a number of old bromides commonly observed in Chinese foreign policy statements as well as a new focus on defending globalization. Many of these long-standing features have been evident in Chinese analyses of its external environment since at least the beginning of the reform era: the development toward a multipolar world in which no single power dominates, a generally stable international situation, and an emphasis on "peace and development" as the "underlying trend" of the times.¹

This generally positive overarching assessment of the world outside China has allowed Beijing to remain focused for decades on the implementation of an outward-oriented, cooperative, long-term economic development strategy, seen as essential to achieving the country's national development goals. Given China's ongoing need to maintain relatively high (if somewhat lower than before) levels of economic growth while transitioning toward a more efficient, value-added technology-focused and information-driven development model, there is no reason to think that Beijing will alter this assessment.²

At the same time, over several party congresses, Chinese leaders have paired this positive viewpoint with remarks indicating the continued presence of potential threats to Chinese security and prosperity. The latter usually involve some variation of the following statement:

Hegemonism [read: U.S. behavior] and power politics still exist, local conflicts and hotspot issues keep emerging, imbalances in the world economy are [present or] worsening, the North-South gap is widening, and traditional and nontraditional threats to security are intertwined.

In addition to these views, the Chinese leadership for the first time highlighted so-called neo-interventionism (that is, efforts or supporting arguments by the United States, and other usually Western states to intervene militarily in the domestic affairs of various countries) alongside hegemonism and power politics at the 18th Party Congress. This addition was primarily due to the U.S.-led or U.S.-supported military interventions that occurred or were threatened in Libya and Syria after the 17th Party Congress in 2007.

This phrase might not appear or be given as much prominence at the 19th Party Congress, however. This is because, while the Syria situation has arguably grown worse since 2012, with some outside (albeit limited) intervention by foreign powers, the only significant new example of large-scale intervention has been carried out against Ukraine and Crimea by Russia, China's increasingly friendly strategic partner. It is unlikely that Beijing would seek to call attention to Moscow's misbehavior, although this possibility cannot be discounted entirely.

In addition to these past negative features, the 19th Party Congress will probably also highlight a new set of potential threats to peace, continued growth, and stability, in the form of growing imbalances in global economic development, and a troubling backlash against greater global economic integration and the forces of globalization. Just last month, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated:

We live in a world that is witnessing profound changes in the international landscape and balance of power, prominent traditional and non-traditional threats, insufficient driving force for global growth and a growing backlash against globalization. There are unprecedented challenges for mankind's pursuit of lasting peace and sustainable development.

The 19th Party Congress will likely for the first time include language similar to this. In addition, Beijing will probably present itself as a strong opponent of protectionism and a proponent of greater global and regional economic integration. This has become a noticeable theme in Chinese statements by Xi Jinping and other senior leaders, especially since the election of Donald Trump and the rise of similar "me-first" nationalists in Europe. For instance, while giving a speech at the 2017 World Economic Forum annual meeting, Xi stated that "pursuing protectionism is like locking oneself in a dark room. While wind and rain may be kept outside, that dark room will also block light and air. No one will emerge as a winner in a trade war."³

China's National Development Goals and Foreign Policy Principles

At the 19th Party Congress, China's top leaders will likely focus on two of the country's overarching, long-standing national development objectives, while connecting these goals to a relatively new term, the China Dream, that Xi first coined in late 2012 to describe the country's aspirations for national rejuvenation. Specifically, the rhetoric at the congress will doubtlessly continue to emphasize China's double centenary tasks of building:

- "A moderately prosperous society" by 2021, the centenary of the founding of the CCP, a project ratified in Jiang Zemin's report to the 16th Party Congress in 2002, and later reaffirmed in Hu Jintao's subsequent congress reports in 2007 and 2012, as part of his efforts to build a "harmonious society"⁴
- A "strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country" by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the PRC

These two long-standing goals were first announced during the Jiang Zemin era at the 15th Party Congress in 1997. However, they arguably did not become highly prominent until Xi became CCP general secretary in 2012 at the 18th Party Congress. After that event, these goals came to be identified as the main development features of Xi's China Dream concept. There is little doubt that this concept will be highlighted at the upcoming Party Congress, as an indication of Xi's dominant stature within the CCP leadership.

The general characterization of China's current and future foreign policy principles or guidelines that appear at the 19th Party Congress will also likely be similar to those found in recent party congresses. The key phrases will probably involve references to China's ongoing efforts to

continue to hold high the banner of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit and strive to uphold world peace and promote common development [and] . . . unwaveringly follow a win-win strategy of opening up and promote robust, sustainable and balanced growth of the global economy through increased cooperation.

These stock phrases will likely be paired with more recent references to "a new type of international relations," and "a new model of major-country relations"; these two oft-used slogans originated during the Hu Jintao era but have been raised to greater prominence under Xi.⁵ Some observers believe that these slogans have been downplayed in recent months, and thus might be omitted from the 19th Party Congress documents. This is unlikely, however, given their very close association with Xi and his policies, and the fact that U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson seemed to echo them in March 2017 during a meeting with Xi Jinping in Beijing. Tillerson stated that "the U.S. side is ready to develop relations with China based on the principle of no conflict, no confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation."⁶

Also likely to be included in the 19th Party Congress remarks on foreign policy is a repetition of the need for China to advance multilateral diplomacy, and, most notably, to reform the international system and the structure of global governance, especially regarding the representation and views of developing countries. Past party congresses have stressed this latter theme many times. As a representative example, in a July 2017 speech, State Councilor Yang Jiechi explained that "In response to major issues and challenges confronting global governance, General Secretary Xi Jinping has put forth a series of new propositions on global governance, security, development, justice, interests and globalization which are aimed at promoting a global governance system that is fairer, more equitable, inclusive and balanced."⁷

Alongside these long-standing statements of Beijing's central foreign policy features, the 19th Party Congress will also undoubtedly repeat the past 17th and (especially) 18th PC statements of China's need to "safeguard China's sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and ensure its peaceful development." The most recent and pointed reference to this now core element of Chinese foreign policy under Xi occurred last summer, in a speech by State Councilor and head of Chinese foreign affairs Yang Jiechi, who formerly served as foreign minister. Yang remarked that China must unequivocally make clear China's positions on Taiwan, the South China Sea, and other issues concerning China's major core interests, adding: "We have drawn a clear line of what is unacceptable, and acted forcefully to defend our core interests as well as legitimate rights."

This emphasis on protecting China's sovereignty and rights is central to the concept of *weiquan* or "rights protection" that the Xi Jinping regime has now placed alongside the long-standing concept of *weiwen* or "stability maintenance." Although the protection of national sovereignty and rights certainly predates the Xi period, the two concepts became identified as equally important goals of China's foreign and defense policies, and raised to prominence, only after Xi became CCP general secretary.⁸

One important question is how much greater prominence will be given to the *weiquan* concept during the 19th Party Congress, if any. Many observers believe that if, as expected, Xi Jinping is able to strengthen further his dominance over the Chinese leadership at the congress, he will likely adopt a more aggressive stance toward territorial disputes and the advancement of China's maritime rights. Hence, the argument goes, a greater emphasis on *weiquan* at the congress would perhaps herald such a shift. However, this assumes that Xi thus far has been prevented from advocating those elements because of leadership resistance, which is a very dubious assumption. There is no evidence that any of Xi's senior colleagues question or oppose the increased emphasis on *weiquan*.

In the defense and security realm, the 19th Party Congress will almost certainly repeat Xi's post-18th Party Congress stress on fostering a "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" environment for the Asia-Pacific. Xi first coined this slogan and defined its contents at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May 2014.

It has been repeated several times since then, perhaps most notably by Yang Jiechi at the opening session of the fifty-first Munich Security Conference in February 2015.⁹ Essentially, the four aspects of this concept are intended to serve as the basis for an Asia security system that is all-inclusive, covers all types of security problems, centers on cooperative dialogues, recognizes the importance of development and regional integration to security, and thus does not seek "absolute" security for any single nation nor use alliances to target third parties. These views challenge, in part, what Beijing regards as U.S. efforts to seek absolute security and strengthen alliances aimed at countering China.

The 19th Party Congress might also refer to another set of security-related concepts coined since the previous party congress: the so-called three principles for handling hotspot issues. These include:

- Adherence to the principle of noninterference in internal affairs and opposition to the practice of imposing one's will on others
- A willingness to uphold fairness and justice as well as opposition to the singular pursuit of selfish interests
- Adherence to political settlement and opposition to the use of force in handling hotspot issues

Although these concepts are fundamental to Beijing's well-established support for win-win cooperation and the peaceful settlement of disputes, their combination in a set of explicit principles for handling "hotspot issues" such as maritime sovereignty disputes in East Asia is new. If mentioned, these concepts will likely be placed alongside any reference to support for "a new type of international relations." But they will probably receive a more detailed treatment at the 2018 NPC, given the more detailed presentation of foreign and defense policy issues that occur at that event.

Regarding military policies in particular, the 19th Party Congress will likely reiterate the statement that appeared for the first time at the 18th Party Congress of the need to construct a "strong national defense and powerful armed forces that are commensurate with China's international standing and meet the needs of its security and development interests," as well as the need for the Chinese military "to increase cooperation and mutual trust with the armed forces of other countries, participate in regional and international security affairs, and thus play an active role in international political and security fields."

Although these statements seem rather innocuous and unremarkable on the surface, in fact, this calls for armed forces with a strength and presence beyond China's borders equal to its growing international standing in 2012 was unprecedented, and it was indicative of the more active and ambitious role expected of the Chinese military under Xi.

Equally important, as part of its efforts to increase China's military presence overseas, the 19th Party Congress will almost certainly follow the previous congress in stressing China's maritime interests, and perhaps again explicitly refer to the need to "build China into a maritime power."¹⁰ Although the latter statement certainly includes commercial and other nonmilitary maritime elements, it no doubt also refers to China's need to build up military and paramilitary capabilities across the maritime reaches.

Finally, the 19th Party Congress is likely to repeat the need to also stress space and cyberspace security. These are now recognized as key elements in China's foreign and defense policies, and the reference to cyberspace was unprecedented in the 18th Party Congress, as was the reference to space *in relation to security*.

Major Chinese Foreign Policy Initiatives

In past party congresses, foreign policy-related statements have included references to specific policy initiatives designed to achieve the type of broad goals outlined above. These are not detailed descriptions of specific policies. Such details usually are unveiled during or just after the subsequent spring NPC meeting, which naturally focuses on government policies. However, the mere mentioning of individual foreign policy initiatives at a party congress usually guarantees their inclusion at the subsequent NPC. Some of these policies are long-standing and foundational, although many reflect a specific spin or new content associated with the paramount leader.

Since the 19th Party Congress will constitute the first major party meeting occurring entirely under the rule of the Xi regime, there is no doubt that policies or concepts associated most closely with Xi since the 18th Party Congress will be mentioned. These will likely include:

- the Belt and Road Initiative, a Chinese-led effort to fund infrastructure and other projects throughout Eurasia
- diplomatic relations with nations along China's periphery
- the ongoing search for a new type of great power relationship with the United States and other major powers
- a variety of high profile multilateral events, including those that China has organized to promote Xi's views on issues related to global governance and globalization

These four categories of diplomatic and economic initiatives, all closely associated with Xi Jinping, reflect his activist efforts to promote the previously outlined concepts and goals, from the China Dream to comprehensive security and “rights protection.”¹¹ Hence, it would be surprising if the 19th Party Congress does not in some manner highlight or at least mention each of them.

Beyond these core policy initiatives, it is possible that the 19th Party Congress will also mention Sino-Russian relations, given the notable improvements in this relationship since the 18th Party Congress. However, it is not common for party congresses to mention specific foreign policy relationships (with the exception of invariably indirect references to the United States), so it would not be surprising if this does not occur.

Another question is whether the party congress will make any reference to the ongoing North Korea nuclear crisis. This is possible, yet again not likely. Despite the importance of this issue in Chinese foreign policy today, the leadership’s tendency not to mention such particulars at party congresses may mean that it will go unmentioned. However, it is possible that, given the urgency of the matter, the congress might indirectly refer to the North Korea crisis, and Trump’s thinly veiled threats to employ force against Pyongyang, by stressing the need for the peaceful resolution of current crises through negotiation and/or the avoidance of any use of force other than through common agreement in the United Nations.¹²

Conclusion

Overall, in the realm of foreign policy, the 19th Party Congress will exhibit considerable continuities with previous party congresses of the reform era; it will also doubtlessly highlight some new features most closely associated with Xi Jinping, namely the China Dream and rights protection (*weiquan*), as well as an expression of Chinese support for globalization and opposition to protectionism and the sort of narrow, me-first nationalism reflected in the trade policies of the Trump administration.

None of this will mark a clear departure from the generally benign and cooperative foreign policy elements of the past several decades. Indeed, Xi and the CCP leadership will almost certainly continue to recognize the necessity of maintaining generally positive relations with Japan as well as the United States and other Western countries. Unlike the current U.S. administration, Chinese leaders recognize that China will continue to profit enormously from the forces of global economic integration and also must cooperate with other major industrial powers to deal with serious transnational security threats such as climate change. They also know that—in order to make a stable transition to a new normal of lower, but still robust, growth rates; higher living standards; and lower levels of corruption and pollution—they must push forward with major structural reforms that will demand a continued focus on their domestic environment for many years to come. These imperatives will make them highly averse to any shifts in the regional or global order that could threaten stability and prosperity, such as a transition to a confrontational foreign policy toward the United States.

However, such realities do not preclude the possibility of greater tensions between China and the United States, its allies, and other Asian states over trade, investment, sovereignty rights, and a variety of activities involving Chinese and U.S. or Japanese military forces in the Western Pacific. There is no doubt that Xi and the Chinese leadership are seeking to more effectively use China’s growing international presence and influence to promote the nation’s interests in such sensitive areas. As a result, tensions with China will in fact likely increase, despite the many positive elements of the 19th Party Congress noted above.

The most serious of these tensions will almost certainly be in Asia, regarding sovereignty disputes and military activities occurring along China’s maritime periphery. Indeed, escalating crises in these realms could adversely affect overall relations between China and other countries, absent the adoption by all parties of new approaches to Asian security involving more extensive confidence-building measures and a series of mutual understandings regarding the major likely sources of conflict in the future, including the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, maritime disputes, and the relative military capabilities of and activities between China, the United States, and the latter’s allies.

The good news is that, rather than marking a turn toward confrontation between China and the West and Japan, the 19th Party Congress will likely signal a high level of stability and continuity in Chinese foreign policy. The bad news is that this continuity is unlikely to reduce the most serious challenges facing China’s relations with the United States and its allies.

The author offered an oral version of these remarks at Carnegie on October 6, 2017, as part of several presentations on the 19th Party Congress given by authors of the China Leadership Monitor, an online publication based at Stanford University.

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Notes

¹ For examples of past party congress reports, please see the following: “Full Text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 16th Party Congress,” China.org.cn, November 17, 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/49007.htm>; “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 17th Party Congress,” *China Daily*, October 24, 2007, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/24/content_6204564.htm; and “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, November 27, 2012, http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/18th_CPC_National_Congress_Eng/t992917.htm.

² “The ‘New Normal’ of China’s Economy,” *China Daily*, October 10, 2014, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-10/10/content_18716671.htm; Ross Garnaut, “China’s New Normal Inches On,” East Asia Forum, July 10, 2016, <http://www.easiaforum.org/2016/07/10/chinas-new-normal-inches-on/>.

³ Also see Stephen Fidler, Te-Ping Chen, and Lingling Wei, “China’s Xi Jinping Seizes Role as Leader on Globalization,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-jinping-defends-globalization-1484654899>; “China, New Zealand Pledge Support for Free Trade to Counter Global Protectionism,” Reuters, February 9, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-newzealand-china/china-new-zealand-pledge-support-for-free-trade-to-counter-global-protectionism-idUSKBN15P058?il=0>; Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views on the Trump Administration’s Asia Policy,” *China Leadership Monitor* 53 (Spring 2017), <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm53ms.pdf>.

⁴ For details on the content of this goal, see John Ross, “China’s Five Year Plan to Achieve a ‘Moderately Prosperous Society,’” China.org.cn, http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2015-10/30/content_36935303.htm.

⁵ Qiao Wei, “The Origins of Win-Win Cooperation Concepts,” CCTV, October 20, 2015, <http://english.cntv.cn/2015/10/20/ARTI1445325120332760.shtml>; Yu Hongjun, “China and the United States: Building New Relations Between Major Powers,” China Institute of International Studies, November 25, 2013, http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2013-11/25/content_6486747.htm; *U.S.-China Relations: Toward a New Model of Major Power Relationship* edited by Rudy deLeon and Yang Jiemian, (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, February 2014), <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ChinaReport-Full.pdf>.

⁶ Please also see Laura Rosenberger, “Did Rex Tillerson Misspeak or Intentionally Kowtow to China?,” *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/22/did-rex-tillerson-misspeak-or-intentionally-kowtow-to-china/>; Feng Zhang, “Tillerson Speaks Chinese,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-04-04/tillerson-speaks-chinese>.

⁷ Also see “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at 18th Party Congress” and “Quotable Quotes on China’s Major-Country Diplomacy: Global Governance,” *China Daily*, September 13, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-09/13/content_31933242.htm.

⁸ “Document: China’s Military Strategy,” USNI News, May 26, 2015, <https://news.usni.org/2015/05/26/document-chinas-military-strategy>; Ryan Martinson, “A Salt Water Perspective on China’s New Military Strategy,” RealClearDefense, June 1, 2015, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2015/06/02/a_salt_water_perspective_on_chinas_new_military_strategy_107997.html.

⁹ “For a Vision of Common, Comprehensive, Cooperative and Sustainable Security,” *China Daily*, February 9, 2015, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2015-02/09/content_19530681.htm. The fullest exposition of the concept occurs in a lengthy document entitled “China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation” issued by the State Council Information Office in January 2017. See “Full Text: China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation,” *Xinhua News Agency*, January 11, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2017-01/11/c_135973695_2.htm.

¹⁰ Michael D. Swaine, “Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy,” *China Leadership Monitor* 44 (Summer 2014), <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm44ms.pdf>.

¹¹ “Xi Jinping zai zhoubian wajiao gongzuo zuo tanhui shang fabiao zhongyao yanjiang” [Important Speech by Xi Jinping at the Work Forum on Chinese Diplomacy Toward the Periphery], *Xinhua News Agency*, October 25, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm; Paul Haenle, “What Does a New Type of Great-Power Relations Mean for the United States and China?,” Carnegie Endowment, January 15, 2014, <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2014/01/15/what-does-new-type-of-great-power-relations-mean-for-united-states-and-china-pub-54202>; Cai Mingzhao, “Quanmian keguan renshi dangdai zhongguo de zhongyao wenxian” [Important documents on a comprehensive, objective understanding of contemporary China: an introduction to *The Governance of China* by Xi Jinping], *People’s Daily*, September 29, 2014, <http://theory.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2014/0929/c40531-25757337.html>; “Xi Eyes More Enabling Int’l Environment for China’s Peaceful Development,” Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, November 30, 2014, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2014-11/30/content_4554680.htm; “Goujian zhongmei xinxing daguo guanxi” [Building a new model of U.S.-China great power relations], *People’s Daily*, July 21, 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0721/c397563-27337996.html>; “Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum,” *Xinhua News Agency*, May 14, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm; “President Xi’s Speech to Davos in Full.”

¹² Chinese observers have made this argument repeatedly in private conversations with the author and other analysts since early August 2017.

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