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# 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC

## China Review 2022-05

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- Xi Jinping was re-elected as the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee (CC). This is already his third five-year term in office.
- China's most powerful institution, the 7-member CPC Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) is now stacked with Xi's loyalists.

# Key takeaways from CPC's 20<sup>th</sup> Congress:

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- Xi Jinping was re-elected as the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee (CC). This is already his third five-year term in office.
- China's most powerful institution, the 7-member CPC Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) is now stacked with Xi's loyalists.
- Based on the average age of PSC members (the youngest of whom, Ding Xuexiang, is 60 years old), there does not seem to be a clear successor to Xi in five years' time (Xi joined the PSC at 54).
- The amendments to the CPC constitution, which entrenched Xi's role as the "core" of the party, and the direction of policy he pursues both suggest an even more audacious and unbridled continuation of Xi's personal-ambition-driven politics.

## What is the CPC National Congress and what are its Functions?

The CPC National Congress is a congress of party delegates from all over China held every five years, tasked with electing new party leadership and formulating political guidelines for the upcoming five years. Key functions of the Congress:

- a) Assessing the party's performance and accomplishments of the last five years (analyzing and approving the report of the general secretary of the CPC CC) and developing the com-

mon guidelines and goals for the party across a range of areas for the next five years;

- b) Approving amendments to the constitution of the party;
- c) Electing new members of the CPC Central Committee;
- d) Approving the report of the outgoing CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and electing its new members.

This year's CPC National Congress, which took place on October 16–22, is the most important event in China that marks the end of the country's political cycle. Although this year's event received more attention than usual from global media, its form and style remained unchanged. Its biggest surprise was the escorting of Hu Jintao, China's former leader, from the closing session of the event.

# 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC

## Surprises from the CPC Congress:

1. The Politburo has shrunk from 25 to 24 members. The size of the Standing Committee has remained unchanged and still consists of 7 people.
2. An informal age-limit rule (known as “seven up, eight down”) has not been strictly adhered to. The fact that Li Keqiang and Wang Yang stepped down suggests that Xi is the main decision-maker regarding personnel changes.
3. The new 24-member CPC Politburo has no female members for the first time since 1997.
4. The average age of the Standing Committee members is 65. The average age of the Standing Committee elected five years ago was 62. The youngest Standing Committee member is 60 years old, which suggests that there is no potential successor for Xi (Xi himself joined the Politburo aged 54 and became the general secretary at 59).
5. The general atmosphere and decisions taken suggest that in China, national security takes precedence over economic growth. The continuity of Xi’s rule may mean that we should expect political decisions increasingly grounded in ideology.

## Key agenda items of CPC’s 20th Congress:

1. *Report of the general secretary of the CPC Central Committee*

As per tradition, a key element of the CPC Congress opening ceremony is the report of the general secretary of the CPC CC. This political report can be characterized as a lengthy text, which is made rather complex by the use of special terminology, slogans and China-specific conceptions. All of this is wrapped into the political discourse of the 100th anniversary of the CPC.

The report, which is prepared once every five years, can be seen as a reconstruction of the historical line of the CPC that updates and adds to the tradition of political rhetoric, highlights the achievements, and, most importantly, identifies the challenges ahead for the party (and China) and underscores the importance of the party leadership in overcoming them.

The report of the general secretary of the CPC CC is a political and not a working document. In other words, it states the overall vision and guidelines for the party and should not be expected to be rich in specificity or detailed analysis of China’s domestic issues. This political report is markedly different from the annual government work report presented at the National People’s Congress. The CPC Congress is not tasked with electing the president (or more precisely, the State Chairman) or the State Council; this will take place during the National People’s Congress next year.

Key points from Xi’s speech at the CPC Congress:

1. Ideology and autonomy are important factors for China’s growth;
2. The international situation is worsening, and the party must prepare for the challenges ahead;
3. The main point of focus is security, not economic growth or reforms;
4. The importance of the Taiwan question is rising;
5. The armed forces are being modernized and must play a more active role abroad<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. *Amendments to the CPC constitution*

The CPC constitution is the main document guiding the party (it should be noted here that the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China is an entirely separate document.). Amendments to the constitution can be implemented only during the CPC congress. The current version of the constitution was approved in 1982.

New amendments and additions to the constitution include<sup>2</sup>:

- “Two Establishes”: To establish the status of Xi as the “core” of the party and the guiding role of his “Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era”;
- To advance the “Chinese path to modernization”;
- To nurture the “fighting spirit”;
- To consistently strive to ensure “the wellbeing of the people”;
- To develop “a broader, fuller, and more robust whole-process people’s democracy”;
- To demand “political loyalty in the military”;
- To oppose and deter separatists seeking Taiwan independence;
- To recognize the party as the leadership core;
- To require all party members to study its history.

### 3. Central Commission for Discipline Inspection

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) is the highest internal control and inspection institution of the CPC, tasked with enforcing internal rules and combating corruption in the party. The CCDI members are elected for a five-year term during the CPC Congress. The 20th CPC National Congress approved a new 133-member CCDI, to be headed by Xi's ally Li Xi, who had been newly elected to the CPC Politburo Standing Committee. This institution plays a highly important role in Xi's anti-corruption push against "tigers and flies", which also helped him purge his political opponents.

### 4. Election of the Central Committee of the CPC

The key task of the CPC Congress is to elect the new Central Committee. There have been no structural

changes in this respect: The Congress has elected a 376-member Central Committee. However, only 205 of them are considered full members; the remaining 171 "alternate" members attend the sessions, but have no right to vote. The Central Committee elects the top decision-making bodies in the party, namely the Politburo and its Standing Committee.

The first plenary session of the newly elected 20th Central Committee was held a day after the CPC Congress closed, approving the composition of the new top institutions of the party. The CPC CC Politburo has shrunk from 25 to 24 members, and the Standing Committee continues to have 7 members. For the first time in 25 years, the Politburo has no female member. The Politburo has 13 newly appointed members, and the Standing Committee has 4.

New members of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee:

Item No.	Name, age, position (newly appointed members marked with *)	Background (ties with Xi in bold)
2.	 <p><b>Li Qiang*</b> (63 y/o)  (Prediction: Premier)</p>	<p><i>Member of the Politburo since 2012</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2017: Party Secretary of Shanghai</li> <li>2016–2017: Party Secretary of Jiangsu province</li> <li>2012–2016: Governor of Zhejiang</li> <li><b>2004–2007: Chief of Staff of Xi Jinping in Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee</b></li> </ul>
3.	 <p><b>Zhao Leji</b> (65 y/o)  (Prediction: Chairman of National People's Congress)</p>	<p><i>Member of the Politburo since 2012</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2017: Member of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee</li> <li>2017–2022: Secretary of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (the party's anti-corruption body)</li> <li>2012–2017: Head of the CPC Organization Department</li> <li><b>2007–2012: Party Secretary of Shaanxi province (to which Zhao and Xi, whose father comes from the province, have strong ties)</b></li> <li>2003–2007: Party secretary of Qinghai</li> </ul>
4.	 <p><b>Wang Huning</b> (67 y/o)  (Prediction: Secretary General of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference)</p>	<p><i>Member of the Politburo since 2012</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2017: First Secretary of the CPC Central Committee Secretariat</li> <li>From 2017: Director of Central Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology</li> <li>2002–2020: Director of Central Policy Research Office</li> <li>Scholar and the main ideologue of China's last three leaders, Jiang, Hu, and Xi</li> <li><b>Considered to be the author and theoretician behind Xi's political ideas and concepts (e.g. the Chinese Dream)</b></li> </ul>
5.	 <p><b>Cai Qi*</b> (66 y/o)  First Secretary of the CPC Secretariat</p>	<p><i>Member of the Politburo since 2017</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2017: Party Secretary of Beijing</li> <li>2002–2007: Party Secretary of Taizhou (Zhejiang province)</li> <li>2002–2004: Party Secretary of Quzhou (Zhejiang province)</li> <li><b>Xi Jinping's most trusted ally. Worked with Xi in Fujian province for 15 years at the start of his political career</b></li> </ul>

Item No.	Name, age, position (newly appointed members marked with *)	Background (ties with Xi in bold)
6.	 <b>Ding Xuexiang*</b> (60 y/o)	<i>Member of the Politburo since 2017</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From 2017: Director of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee</li> <li><b>From 2013: Head of the Office of the General Secretary (Xi's Chief of Staff)</b></li> <li><b>From 2013: Director of the Office of the President of PRC</b></li> <li><b>2006–2012: Director of the General Office of the CPC party of Shanghai (2006–2007: Chief of Staff of the CPC Party Secretary of Shanghai Xi Jinping)</b></li> </ul>
7.	 <b>Li Xi*</b> (66 y/o) Secretary of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection	<i>Member of the Politburo since 2017</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From October 23, 2022: Secretary of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection</li> <li>From 2017: Party Secretary of Guangdong province</li> <li>2015–2017: Party Secretary of Liaoning province</li> <li><b>Strong personal ties with Xi, dating back to 1980s (met each other because Xi's father Xi Zhongxun and Li Ziqi were friends)</b></li> </ul>



Newly elected members of the CPC Politburo Standing Committee follow the tradition of going on a trip somewhere together. This time, the trip was laden with symbolic meaning: The destination was Yan'an, the cradle of Mao Zedong's Communist revolution, where Mao conclusively established himself as the leader of the party in 1935–1948. *Source: Global Times*

# Prospects for the Future

The outcome of the 20th CPC National Congress seems to indicate the start of a new political era in China, with Xi leading the country into uncharted territories. The break from norms and traditions in the CPC Congress and a clear departure from Deng's political path of "reform and opening" makes it significantly harder for commentators to analyze China and project its future. As Kevin Rudd suggests, "foreigners must set aside the comfortable analytical frameworks many of them have used to analyze China for the last two generations."<sup>3</sup> The West must revise its attitude to the party's ideology, because under Xi's rule, ideology is the key driver of policy. What conclusions can be drawn from the CPC Congress regarding Xi's vision and potential shifts in China's behavior in the future?

## China in the hands of Xi: Chaos or more cautious governing?

The decisive victory of Xi and his allies at the 20th CPC Congress means that his "iron fist" policies are going to continue. No changes are expected in China's domestic policy in the near term, with internal control, "securitization", strict censorship, and pressure for various institutions to toe the party line continuing to feature prominently on the domestic front. Zero tolerance for dissenting ideas and political factions will continue to be Xi's key domestic policy priority. Xi's anti-corruption push against "tigers and flies" at the start of his rule was received relatively positively by the public, but it has also been used to investigate and purge his political opponents. The CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection plays a key role in implementing this campaign, and the election of Li Xi as its secretary indicates that Xi will be retaining his influence on its conduct.

Xi's success in consolidating power at the CPC Congress leaves no-one in doubt of Xi's full control of the country. However, this step brings the continuity of Xi's rule to a whole new level: From now on, all failures and disappointments will be directly tied to Xi's leadership. Xi will no longer have to fight for power within the party, but this also comes with significantly increased responsibility. While it is dif-

ficult to predict how this will impact Xi's behavior, it cannot be ruled out that his domestic policy moves will be somewhat more cautious and measured, in line with the public opinion at the time. Examples of policy easing were not long in coming: in its very first meeting on November 10, the new Politburo Standing Committee decided to ease its COVID restriction and quarantine rules<sup>4</sup>, despite case numbers in China surging to their highest since April.

## Foreign policy: Yet more Wolf Warrior Diplomacy?

Defying predictions, China's current Foreign Minister Wang Yi continues to rise in power despite the hitherto observed age cap (he is 69 years old), ascending to the new Politburo at the CPC Congress. There is little doubt that he will be replacing the outgoing director of the general office of the CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission, Yang Jiechi, becoming China's highest-ranking diplomat. (The influence and functions of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs pale in comparison to those of the CPC Central Foreign Affairs Commission.) Wang had already become a known proponent of the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, and this promotion suggests that Xi appreciates Wang's diplomatic approach and ability. This appointment also means that China's aggressive diplomacy, far from being on its way out, will likely become even more confrontational. The recent diplomatic incident at Manchester's Chinese consulate is a telling example of the Wolf Warrior Diplomacy<sup>5</sup>, and we are likely to witness them increasingly frequently in the future. The reason behind this is very simple: rather aggressive and nationalistic actions of diplomats not only demonstrate loyalty to Xi, but can also help them climb the career ladder.

The escalating rivalry in Southeast Asia is likely to become one of China's key foreign policy priorities. China has kept a very close eye on this for the last decade. The growing concern in Western societies over ties with China means that one may expect it to far more frequently employ economic and other types of leverage to strengthen its position in the region. China's reckless efforts to defend its interests abroad, which often have to do with its confrontation with the United States, will only heighten the tensions in the eastern part of Asia. In his political report at the CPC Congress, Xi underscored not only the modernization of the military, but also the need to expand the role of the country's armed forces in

defending China's interests abroad—and the growth of China's network of military bases abroad is therefore likely to become one of the Chinese military's top priorities.

Resistance against those seeking Taiwan independence has been inscribed in the CPC constitution, which is a hugely significant step suggesting that the question of Taiwan sits atop the party's list of priorities. Despite the lack of significant shifts on the issue at the CPC congress, Xi paid more attention to Taiwan. It bears mentioning that the general secretary of the CPC clearly emphasized that the "reunification" with Taiwan is essential to realizing the goal of the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation". Closely tied with Xi's idea of the "Chinese Dream", this goal is clearly defined: China must achieve reunification by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The composition of the CPC Central Military Commission is also worthy of note. Xi was careful to appoint officers with specific experience: The 72-year-old Gen. Zhang Youxia stayed in his role as Vice Chairman (as one of the few officers with actual military experience). The career leap of the 65-year-old Gen. He Weidong, who has been appointed Deputy Vice Chairman, also sets a new precedent and defies the hitherto followed norms: unlike his predecessors, He had not been a member of either the Central Committee or the Central Military Commission. However, this remarkable appointment shows us Xi's priorities: He Weidong had served as Commander of the Western Theater Command Ground Force (he is believed to have been involved in coordinating China's moves in the standoff between China and India at the Doklam plateau), before being appointed as Commander of the Eastern Theater Command (in charge of the military's actions related to Taiwan). Moreover, He and Xi have personal ties, which date back to serving together in Fujian province. The composition of the commission is somewhat unexpected: four out of six members of the committee that used to represent all the branches of service now come from the ground forces.

## No successor: The CPC not learning from past mistakes?

In view of the outcome of the 20th CPC National Congress and the resulting changes, it cannot be ruled out that Xi intends to remain in power for life. The orderliness, consistency and clear ascension of a new generation of leaders up the ladder of the party hierarchy that had been firmly in place before Xi are now non-existent. Both the age of the newly-appointed CPC Politburo Standing Committee members (the youngest of whom is 60) and the appointments to key positions in various committees manifestly suggest that Xi has no clear successor. For instance, the position of the vice chairman of the CPC Central Military Commission, which used to be given to the successor of the general secretary of the CPC, was now given to the 72-year-old general Zhang Youxia.

From a long-term perspective, the reduced circulation in the ranks of the party, the emphasis on loyalty to Xi as the key criterion for ascension up the ladder of the party hierarchy, and the potential continuation of Xi's rule even beyond his third term in office can all serve to destabilize the party from within, especially after Xi's departure. It is exactly this potential crisis in the party that may present an existential challenge for it. Such precedents in the history of the PRC are not hard to find: the power vacuum left after Mao Zedong's 27-year rule and the absence of a clear party hierarchy resulted in political turmoil and bitter fighting for influence (e.g., the Gang of Four, led by Mao's wife). In view of the current changes in the party and the complete dominance over it of one person, it can confidently be said that the CPC might be going on course to once again repeating its past mistakes.

# Endnotes

1. More detailed analysis of the CPC 20th National Congress's significance for China's military is available CSIS site: <https://chinapower.csis.org/20th-party-congress-china-military-pla-cmc/#outcomes-20th-party-congress>
2. Xinhua, "(CPC Congress) Full text of resolution on Party Constitution amendment", 2022. <http://english.news.cn/20221022/fea670f419d7426ab564a795d5737b52/c.html>
3. Rudd, K., "The Return of Red China", *Foreign Affairs*, 2022. [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/return-red-china?utm\\_medium=newsletters&utm\\_source=twofa&utm\\_campaign=The%20Return%20of%20Red%20China&utm\\_content=20221111&utm\\_term=FA%20This%20Week%20-%20112017](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/return-red-china?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=twofa&utm_campaign=The%20Return%20of%20Red%20China&utm_content=20221111&utm_term=FA%20This%20Week%20-%20112017)
4. Woo, R., Munroe, T., "China shortens quarantines as it eases some of its COVID rules", *Reuters*, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-covid-curbs-intensify-cases-surge-highest-since-shanghai-lock-down-2022-11-11/>
5. Yeung, J., "Chinese diplomat says pulling hair of Hong Kong protester was his duty", *CNN*, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/20/uk/manchester-chinese-consulate-hong-kong-protester-intl-hnk/index.html>