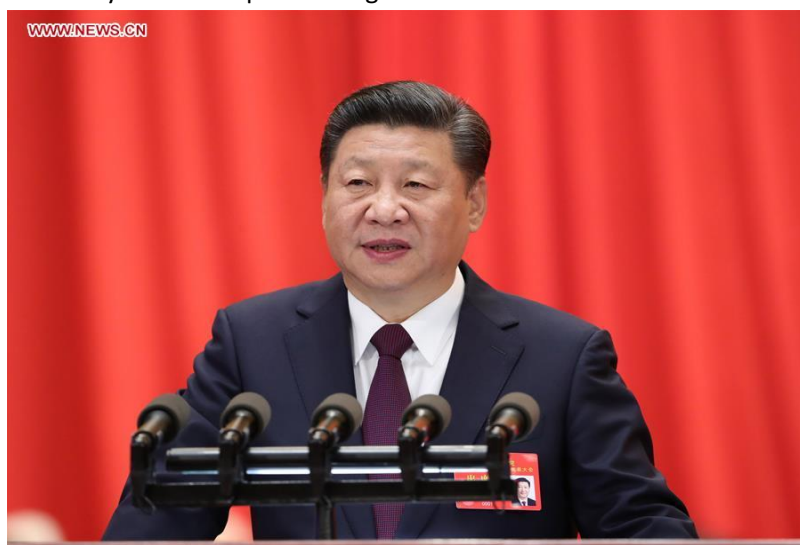


Xi's Speech at the 19th Party Congress: Continuity and Change

by Antara Ghosal Singh, Research Associate, Delhi Policy Group



China recently concluded the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 19th Party Congress — the most celebrated of Chinese political events, held once in every five years — during which key policy decisions are taken and the top Chinese leadership also gets CPC endorsement. Much like previous party congresses, the 19th Party Congress too garnered undivided media attention from across the globe¹. Months before the inauguration of the event, there had been much crystal-ball gazing by experts across the world about the future course of Chinese politics, President Xi's hidden and not-so-hidden political agenda, his political future and his possible successor (if any). During the event itself, every intricate detail of the grand political drama — like the key words uttered by the who's who of the party², the length of speeches³, the water-tight security situation in Beijing⁴, the austerity cuts undertaken by the party members attending the congress event⁵ etc. — all made it to the international headlines. Now that the dust has settled over the 19th Party Congress, it is only pertinent to take a closer look at the event and study the developments in greater detail.



President Xi Jinping delivers a report to the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on October 18, 2017.

Source: Xinhua

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This paper focuses on the speech delivered by President Xi at the 19th Party Congress⁶ and analyses it from the context of the 2012 speech delivered by his predecessor Hu Jintao at the 18th Party Congress⁷, to discern continuity and change in China's position on issues of far-reaching consequence.

It is interesting to note that the overall theme of the 19th Party Congress was not very different from the theme of the 18th party Congress. "Holding high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Gāojǔ zhōngguó tèsè shèhuì zhǔyì wěidà qízhì), securing a decisive victory in building a moderately well-off society in all respects (Juéshèng quánmiàn jiànchéng xiǎokāng shèhuì), winning the great victory for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era" (Duóqǔ xīn shídài zhōngguó tèsè shèhuì zhǔyì wěidà shènglì) have been the recurrent themes in both the Congresses. The two new concepts introduced by President Xi this time are: "Remain original to your aspiration and keep our mission firmly in mind" (Bù wàng chūxīn, láojiè shǐmìng) — where the original aspiration and the mission of Chinese Communists refers to "seeking happiness for the Chinese people ("mei hao sheng huo") and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation (zhōnghuá mínzú wěidà fùxīng)"⁸ — and "Make unremitting struggle to achieve the Chinese dream that is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Wèi shíxiàn zhōnghuá mínzú wěidà fùxīng de zhōngguó mèng bùxiè fèndòu).

Even the key themes for Xi's speech at the 19th Party Congress are very much identical with his predecessor's at the 18th Party Congress. The common themes can be loosely translated as the following: (1) The past five years of work and historic changes; (2) Historic mission of Chinese Communist Party in the new era (Xīn shídài zhōngguó gòngchǎndǎng de lìshǐ shǐmìng); (3) Socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era - thoughts and basic strategy (Xīn shídài zhōngguó tèsè shèhuì zhǔyì sīxiǎng hé jīběn fānglüè); (4) Building a moderately well-off society and a modern socialist country, (Juéshèng quánmiàn jiànchéng xiǎokāng shèhuì, kāiqǐ quánmiàn jiànshè shèhuì zhǔyì xiàndàihuà guójiā xīn zhēngchéng); (5) Applying a new vision of development and construction of a modern economic system (Guànchè xīn fāzhǎn lǐniàn, jiànshè xiàndàihuà jīngjì tǐxì); (6) Strengthening people's ownership system and developing socialist democratic politics (Jiànquán rénmín dāngjiā zuò zhǔ zhìdù tǐxì, Fāzhǎn shèhuì zhǔyì mínzǔ zhèngzhì); (7) developing cultural confidence and promoting socialist culture, (Jiāndìng wénhuà zìxìn, tuīdòng shèhuì zhǔyì wénhuà fánróng xīngshèng); (8) improving people's standard of living and strengthening social governance (Tígāo bǎozhàng hé gǎishàn mínshēng shuǐpíng, jiāqiáng hé chuàngxīn shèhuì zhìlǐ); (9) Constructing a beautiful China (Jiākuài shēngtài wénmíng tǐzhì gǎigé, jiànshè

měilì zhōngguó); (10) Developing a powerful military with Chinese Characteristics and carry out comprehensive modernization of national defense and military forces (Jiānchí zǒu zhōngguó tèsè qiáng jūn zhī lù, quánmiàn tuījìn guófáng hé jūnduì xiàndàihuà); (11) Adhering to 'One Country-Two system' and national reunification (Jiānchí "yīguóliǎngzhì", tuījìn zǔguó tǒngyī); (12) Adherence to the path of peaceful development while promoting the concept of community of shared destiny for all humankind (Jiānchí hépíng fāzhǎn dàolù, tuīdòng gòujiàn rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ); and (13) Ensuring strict rule by party and constant improvement of the party's strength and leadership capability (Jiāndìng bù yí quánmiàn cóng yán zhì dǎng, bùduàn tígāo dǎng de zhízhèng nénglì hé lǐngdǎo shuǐpíng).

"Historic mission of Chinese Communist Party in the new era" is the only new addition in Xi's speech.



Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and Chinese president, delivers a report at the 18th National Congress of the CPC, which opened at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Nov. 8, 2012. | Source: china.org.cn

However, the measured tone of the 2012 speech was replaced at the 19th Congress by what seemed to be President Xi's charged/forceful interventions at critical junctures. For instance, while presenting the report on the CPC's past five years of work, Xi mentioned the construction of islands in the South China Sea and the initiation of the "Belt and Road Initiative" among China's key achievements in the last five years, and stressed the need for "preparation of war" and "effectively carrying out the rights at sea" in the coming years. Xi's speech also courted controversy by hinting at the prospect of exporting 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' as practised by China as a new alternative among developing countries who want to "accelerate their

development/modernization process without losing their freedom”.

Unlike Hu’s speech of 2012, President Xi’s speech was marked by several bold assertions like “China approaching the centre of the world in the new era”, China being the “closest than any time in history, more confident and better-abled to achieve the goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, and China fast becoming “a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence” in the coming years.

While in 2012 the focus was on following the guidance of Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of Three Represents and the Scientific Outlook on Development, President Xi delved in detail into the theoretical underpinnings of ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ (zhōngguó tèsè shèhuì zhǔyì) and devising the strategy/policy guidance for implementing the same. He argued that the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the latest achievement of Marxism in China and “a guide to action” for all party members and Chinese people for a very long time in the future. He also listed 14-point fundamental principles⁹ to uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era.



Seen from left to right are former President Hu Jintao (front row, fourth from left), President Xi Jinping, former President Jiang Zemin, and Premier Li Keqiang. Source: Xinhua

Unlike in 2012, Xi’s speech repeatedly emphasized the paramount role played by the party in almost every sphere of Chinese life. One can argue that if “economic reform and opening up” was the underlying theme reverberating through Hu’s speech in 2012, it is “the party and ideology” that formed the very essence of Xi’s three and a half hour long speech at the 19th Party Congress. Xi has been widely quoted in the international media as saying that “government, military, society and schools, north, south, east and west — the party is the leader of all.”¹⁰ It is also interesting to note that while President Xi advocated a comprehensive and strict rule for the party in the foreseeable future, he was rather silent on the Hu-

era popular theme of “intra party democracy”, thereby putting a question mark on the prospects of democracy in China¹¹.



President Xi Jinping inspects troops of the People's Liberation Army during a military parade to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the founding of the PLA on July 30, 2017. Source: Xinhua

It was in the 18th Congress that the CPC, for the first time, presented its goal of building a strong military that “follows the Party, fights to win and forges exemplary conduct.”¹² It was highlighted in the 2012 CPC report that China will strive to “basically complete military mechanization and make major progress in full military IT application by 2020”¹³. This time, President Xi set a new target that the Communist Party of China (CPC) will strive to “fully transform the people’s armed forces into world-class military by the mid-21st century”.

Xi announced that the CPC will strive to build a strong modern army, naval, air force, strategic support forces, a modern coastal air defense system, strong and efficient theatre joint operations command agencies, and an overall modern combat system with Chinese characteristics. It has also been reported that the CPC will also focus on development of an intelligent military and improve combat capabilities for joint operations based on network information system and the ability to fight under multi-dimensional conditions¹⁴.

It is important to note that in 2012, while announcing the CPC’s ambition for modernization of the armed forces, Hu had made a simultaneous declaration that China’s national defense policy is “defensive” in nature and that the “endeavor to strengthen national defense is aimed to safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and territorial integrity and ensure its peaceful development.” Hu also highlighted the Chinese armed forces’ impressive role in maintaining world peace and assured the international community that China “will continue 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”.

However, at the 19th CPC Congress, “combat capability” and “capability to shape a situation, contain a crisis and win a war” dominated Xi’s military agenda. “A military is built to fight,” he said, stressing that “combat readiness” and “preparation for military struggle” are among the highest goals to be pursued by Chinese armed forces in the new era, in order to achieve the Chinese dream of a “formidable China”.

In terms of foreign policy, Xi did reiterate some common themes from Hu’s 2012 speech, like “China will continue to hold high the banner of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit and strive to uphold world peace and promote common development... unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development and firmly pursue an independent foreign policy of peace... China opposes hegemonism and power politics in all their forms...and will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion”. However, at the same time he emphatically stated that “China will not tolerate bullying, never give up its legitimate rights and interests and that no one should ever fantasize that China will quietly swallow any blow to its national interest.”

About Hong Kong and Macao, Xi’s stance was similar to Hu’s, i.e. that China must fully and faithfully implement the principle of “one country, two systems,” under which the people of Hong Kong govern Hong Kong and the people of Macao govern Macao, and both these regions enjoy a high degree of autonomy. However, about Taiwan, Xi was forceful in stating that China has “firm will, (is) full of confidence and (has) enough power to defeat any form of Taiwan independence plot”, and that China “will never allow any person, any organization, any political party, at any time, in any form, to split any piece of Chinese territory from China!”

In his speech at the 2012 Party Congress, President Hu made an observation that China, despite its achievements, should be “soberly aware” of its limitations, and that China “should neither look down upon itself, nor be arrogant”. This delicate balance in Chinese policy-making and posture seems to have largely lost relevance in the era of President Xi Jinping.

Endnotes:

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- ⁶ 进入新时代！习近平十九大报告全文 (Jìnrù xīn shídài! Xījīnpíng shìjiǔ dà bàogào quánwén) October 15, 2017, , http://www.chinapeace.gov.cn/2017-10/18/content_11434229_all.htm, accessed October 30, 2017
- ⁷ Report of Hu Jintao to the 18th CPC National Congress, November 16, 2012, http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm, accessed October 30, 2017
- ⁸ CPC opens 19th national congress as China enters 'new era', October 18, 2017, *Global Times*, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1070798.shtml>, accessed October 31, 2017.
- ⁹ The *Global Times* translated the fourteen points as (1) Ensuring Party leadership over all work; (2) Committing to a people-centered approach; (3) Continuing to comprehensively deepen reform; (4) Adopting a new vision for development; (5) Seeing that the people run the country; (6) Ensuring every dimension of governance is law-based; (7) Upholding core socialist values; (8) Ensuring and improving living standards through development; (9) Ensuring harmony between human and nature; (10) Pursuing a holistic approach to national security; (11) Upholding absolute Party leadership over the people’s forces; (12) Upholding the principle of “one country, two systems” and promoting national reunification; (13) Promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind; (14) Exercising full and rigorous governance over the Party.
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- ¹¹ Reading Between the Lines: Xi’s Epic Speech at the 19th Party Congress, *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/reading-between-the-lines-xis-epic-speech-at-the-19th-party-congress/>, accessed October 28, 2017
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