



# The 20th CPC National Congress and China's Foreign Policy: implication and reflection

Qingmin Zhang<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

A new central leadership was elected at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), ensuring China's domestic political stability and the continuity of its domestic policies. As an extension of China's domestic politics, China's diplomacy stands to likewise embody stability and continuity with regard to its overarching structure, ideology, and diplomatic principles. However, the report delivered by General Secretary Xi Jinping to the 20th CPC National Congress on October 16, 2022 contains two new proclamations, provided with supporting analysis, about the current international landscape and its dynamics. One deals with increasing uncertainty within the external environment; the other formalizes China's self-image as a major power with expanded diplomatic reach and more substantive diplomatic activities and positions. Viewing the world from their vantage point in China, China's diplomatic and foreign relations officials intend to exude the following characteristics: greater resolve and clarity in China's development goals and path, commitment to enhancing balanced and positive interactions with other major countries, and greater accountability as a major country via more proactive diplomacy. In highlighting "Chinese characteristics," China's diplomacy will prioritize national security and demonstrate a stronger fighting spirit.

**Keywords** Communist Party of China (CPC) · 20th CPC National Congress · Diplomacy with Chinese characteristics · Domestic politics · Foreign policy

## 1 Introduction

The National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) has always been a major event that attracts global attention. The 20th CPC National Congress, held at the intersection of two centuries generated unprecedented interest at home

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✉ Qingmin Zhang  
zhangqingmin@pku.edu.cn

<sup>1</sup> Professor at School of International Studies, Peking University, Yiheyuan Rd. 5, Haidian, Beijing, China

and abroad, as it resulted in new leadership and a blueprint for China's future development. Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and difficulties in cross-border movement, 2500 journalists—including 750 foreign journalists—signed up to cover this event, exceeding the number of delegates attending the event (2296) once again.

There are several important reasons why this national congress attracted more attention than previous party congresses. The most important of these reasons is that this was the first party congress held since the 2018 revision of the Chinese constitution. It also revealed what changes would occur within the new Central Committee and who would be elected to form the new CPC leadership. These changes affect not only the 96 million members of the world's largest ruling party, but also China's development and the future of the world. Related issues include the following: How will the new leadership steer the world's most populous country and second-largest economy? After more than 40 years of reform and opening up, will China continue to reform and open up in the face of major changes in the international environment, and if so, how?

On the eve of the 20th CPC National Congress, many Chinese people eagerly awaited the event, while many overseas observers held meetings to discuss what might happen. Some research institutions published reports to discuss and predict the trajectory of China after the 20th CPC National Congress.

On October 16, 2022, General Secretary Xi Jinping delivered a report to the 20th CPC National Congress on behalf of the 19th CPC Central Committee in which he summarized the major achievements made by the Party across various aspects of its work since the 19th CPC National Congress and outlined an ambitious blueprint for China's national development goals and tasks for the next five years and beyond. With more than thirty-three thousand words in total, the report aimed to enhance the confidence of the Chinese people and send clear signals to the world. Less than a month after the meeting, leaders from Vietnam and other countries visited Beijing. Academic circles and think tanks in China and abroad again held conferences and seminars to study and interpret the spirit and significance of the 20th CPC National Congress. People with different backgrounds and positions interpreted the content of the party congress differently. In this context, the author, who studies China's diplomacy, provides some personal insights for discussion in academia.

## **2 Continuity in domestic politics and foreign policy**

Diplomacy is an instrument for implementing foreign policy, which serves and is subject to domestic politics. Without domestic politics, it is difficult to understand foreign policy and comprehend diplomacy. China's domestic politics determine the purpose of Chinese foreign policy and the tasks of Chinese diplomacy. The continuity of domestic strategic objectives and the stability of China's political situation are notable features of Chinese politics and hallmarks of China's socialist system and dictate the continuity of China's foreign policy objectives and diplomatic strategy. This continuity is clearly reflected in the 20th CPC National Congress report.

## 2.1 Continuity of strategic objectives and domestic political stability

Understanding the trajectory of domestic and diplomatic development requires a historical perspective. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in 2018 that “[a] historical approach is to observe the unfolding international development from a historical perspective” and that one should “review the past and learn lessons from history so as to gain a keen understanding of the underlying trends of the future” (Xi 2020, 497). If we put the 20th CPC National Congress report into the historical context of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), especially since the beginning of the reform and opening up era, and compare it with the reports of previous party congresses, we get a better understanding of its core message.

In 1978, the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee decided to shift the focus of domestic work from class struggle to socialist modernization. To meet the needs of this shift, the goal of China’s diplomacy became the creation of a favorable international environment for domestic economic development. The 12th CPC National Congress in 1982—the first party congress held after the beginning of reform and opening up—set the goal for China’s domestic economic development of quadrupling the annual output value of China’s industry and agriculture in the twenty years from 1981 to the end of the twentieth century (Hu 1982).<sup>1</sup> Once this goal was realized, the report to the 15th CPC National Congress at the end of the twentieth century set the following goals:

“In the first decade, the gross national product will double that of the year 2000, the people will enjoy an even more comfortable life and a more or less ideal socialist market economy will have come into being. With the efforts to be made in another decade when the Party celebrates its centenary, the national economy will be more developed, and the various systems will be further improved. By the middle of the next century when the People’s Republic celebrates its centenary, the modernization program will have been accomplished by and large and China will have become a prosperous, strong, democratic and culturally advanced socialist country” (Jiang 1997).<sup>2</sup>

In 2002, the report delivered at the 16th CPC National Congress—the first party congress held in the twenty-first century—reiterated China’s social development goal for the first 20 years of this century and foresaw that China would be able to “quadruple the GDP of the year 2000 by 2020” and that “China’s overall national strength and international competitiveness will increase markedly.” The report also stated, “In accordance with the development objectives up to 2010, the centenary of the Party and that of New China, as proposed at the 15th National Congress, we

<sup>1</sup> The following quotes from the report to the 12th CPC National Congress are all from the same source.

<sup>2</sup> The following quotes from the report to the 15th CPC National Congress are all from the same source.

need to concentrate on building a well-off society of a higher standard in an all-round way to the benefit of well over one billion people in the first two decades” (Jiang 2002).<sup>3</sup>

With everything developing as planned, the report to the 19th CPC National Congress proposed that the period from 2017 to 2020 would be decisive in building a well-off society in an all-round way. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the international and domestic situation, the report proposed a two-stage arrangement from 2020 to the middle of this century: “In the first stage from 2020 to 2035, we will build on the foundation created by the moderately prosperous society with a further 15 years of hard work to see that socialist modernization is basically realized.... In the second stage from 2035 to the middle of the twenty-first century, we will, building on having basically achieved modernization, work hard for a further 15 years and develop China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful” (Xi 2017).<sup>4</sup>

China’s domestic strategic objectives have remained consistent since the beginning of reform and opening up. The 20th CPC National Congress, which was held at the historic intersection of the realization of China’s two centenary goals, took place at a turning point in history, reaffirming the two-step strategic arrangement laid out during the 19th CPC National Congress and stating that the central task of the Congress would be to “lead the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in a concerted effort to realize the Second Centenary Goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects and to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization” (Xi 2022).<sup>5</sup> The continuity of domestic political objectives and policies provides the domestic basis and conditions for the continuity of diplomatic work.

## 2.2 Stability of collective leadership

“Once the political line is set, cadres are the decisive factor” (Editorial Department of Selected Works of Mao Zedong 1969, 492). At the 6th Plenary Session of the 6th CPC Central Committee held in Yan’an in 1938, Mao Zedong published *On the New Stage* and made this assertion. The report is a summary of the revolutionary experience of the Communist Party of China. The 6th Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee adopted the Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century, which “established Comrade Xi Jinping’s core position on the Party Central Committee and in the Party as a whole, and defined the guiding role of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” (People’s Daily 2021). Late referred to as “two establishments”, this provision was another clear and unequivocal signal that the Party’s core leadership would maintain continuity following the 2018 constitutional amendment to lift the two-term limitation on the China’s presidency.

<sup>3</sup> The following quotes from the report to the 16th CPC National Congress are all from the same source.

<sup>4</sup> The following quotes from the report to the 19th CPC National Congress are all from the same source.

<sup>5</sup> The following quotes from the report to the 20th CPC National Congress are all from the same source.

With consensus reached on the continuity of China's leadership core, observers at home and abroad eagerly awaited news on the composition of China's new leadership. The 1st Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee was held immediately after the end of the 20th CPC National Congress to elect a new leadership. According to the People's Daily and other state media, the new Party leadership, elected on the principle of "political firmness and loyalty to the Party," is "well-qualified and well-structured," and each member will "firmly uphold the 'two establishments,' resolutely support the 'two upholds,'<sup>6</sup> take the lead in studying and implementing the Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," and is "purposeful in closely following the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core in thinking, political stance, and action" (People's Daily 2022a, 5). According to the same principle, the 14th National People's Congress (NPC), concluded on March 16, 2023 elected President Xi for a third term, endorsed Li Qiang as new Premier, and also approved Ministers of the State Council. The new government further ensures the continuity of Chinese politics. The continuity of both China's leadership core and team also determines the continuity of guiding ideology, which translates to consistency in foreign policy and diplomacy.

Since the 18th CPC National Congress, the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core has advanced the general development trend of China and the world in the new era and carried out a series of major theoretical and practical innovations in diplomatic work, forming Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy. The 19th CPC National Congress established Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as a long-term guiding ideology that the Party must adhere to and wrote it into the Party constitution. The Central Conference on Work Related to Foreign Affairs held in June 2018 established the guiding position of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and made it clear that "Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy is an important part of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (CPC Department of Publicity and PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021, 1). The core essence of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy has ten aspects, the first of which is to "uphold the authority of the CPC Central Committee as the leader to strengthen the centralized and unified leadership of foreign affairs." The second is to "adhere to the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as the mission to promote major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" (CPC Department of Publicity and PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021, 2–3). Given that the core of major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is also the Party's leadership over diplomacy, such repetition further confirms the Party's important role as centralized and unified leadership over diplomacy.

In addition to the above, the 19th CPC National Congress wrote into the Party constitution that "the Party exercises overall leadership over all areas of endeavor in every part of the country" (People's Daily 2017, 1–2). In March 2018, the 1<sup>st</sup> Session of the 13th National People's Congress adopted an amendment to the Party

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<sup>6</sup> The two upholds refer to upholding General Secretary Xi Jinping's core position on the CPC Central Committee and in the Party as a whole, and upholding the Central Committee's authority and its centralized, unified leadership.

constitution that states that “the leadership of the CPC is the defining feature of Chinese socialism” (People’s Daily 2018a, 1). A series of subsequent institutional arrangements implemented Party leadership across all aspects of governance. The 20th CPC National Congress report further stressed the need to “unswervingly uphold the Party’s overall leadership,... resolutely uphold the CPC Central Committee’s authority and its centralized, unified leadership, and exercise the leadership in all aspects and every stage of the endeavors of the Party and the country.” The continuity and stability of these diplomatic guiding thoughts provide an institutional guarantee for the steadfastness of China’s diplomacy.

### 2.3 Continuity in diplomacy as an extension of domestic politics

Foreign policy serves domestic politics, and diplomacy is an extension of domestic affairs. The report to the 20th CPC National Congress, in its discussion of China’s foreign policy and diplomacy over the next five years, echoed the sentiments and policies of the past. Looking at the report from a longer-term historical perspective, we can see that aspects of this policy continuation started at different times in PRC history.

Specifically, the report’s reaffirmation of China’s commitment to its foreign policy goals of upholding world peace and promoting common development continues the diplomatic principles that China has followed since the founding of the PRC. Its statements that “China remains firm in pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace and has always decided its position and policy on issues based on their own merits” and “China remains committed to the fundamental national policy of opening up to the outside world, and firmly pursues a mutually beneficial strategy of opening up” represent a continuation of the foreign policy doctrines promulgated since the beginning of reform and opening up. This continuity in China’s foreign policy has continued under Xi. Statements made under his leadership include the following: “China plays an active part in the reform and development of the global governance system,” “[China] pursues a vision of global governance featuring shared growth through discussion and collaboration,” “China upholds true multilateralism, promotes greater democracy in international relations, and works to make global governance fairer and more equitable,” and “China is firm in safeguarding the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order underpinned by international law, and the basic norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It opposes all forms of unilateralism and the forming of blocs or exclusive groups targeted against particular countries.” These statements lay out the main points of China’s foreign policy and diplomatic work in the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics. These points are the continuation of China’s foreign policy and have been under development since the 18th CPC National Congress. They comprise the main principles of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy.

The continuity of China’s foreign policy is also reflected in the continuity of China’s diplomatic structure, which mirrors the structure of China’s foreign relations efforts since the beginning of this century. Since the founding of the PRC, the

reports of all the party congresses have elaborated on China's foreign relations strategy and have made clear the importance of forging strong relationships with different countries. Before reform and opening up, the reports to the 8th to 11th CPC National Congresses basically laid out China's diplomatic structure from the perspectives of the two opposing camps between US-led West bloc and the Soviet-led East bloc, making it clear whom to oppose and with whom to ally. After reform and opening up, the report to the 12th CPC National Congress situated relationships with developing countries as the "foothold and starting point" of China's foreign relations. After the end of the Cold War, the 14th CPC National Congress gave top priority to multilateral diplomacy, and the 15th CPC National Congress put neighboring countries first in China's foreign relations.

The report to the 16th CPC National Congress set forth, for the first time, China's diplomatic priorities in this order: major countries, neighboring countries, developing countries, and multilateral diplomacy. This structure was extended until 2022, when the report to the 20th CPC National Congress explicated China's diplomatic structure using the following language:

"China works to enhance coordination and positive interaction with other major countries to build major-country relations featuring peaceful coexistence, overall stability, and balanced development. Acting on the principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness and the policy of forging friendships and partnerships with its neighbors, China strives to enhance friendly ties, mutual trust, and converging interests with its neighboring countries. Guided by the principles of sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith and with a commitment to the greater good and shared interests, China endeavors to strengthen solidarity and cooperation with other developing countries and safeguard the common interests of the developing world."

In other words, there is no major change to the traditional structure of China's foreign relations in which major countries are the key, neighboring countries are the priority, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateral diplomacy is the new stage. This demonstrates continuity in China's diplomatic principles since the beginning of the new era.

### **3 Changes in the external environment and new developments in China's diplomacy**

Foreign policy is "formulated by the central decision-making bodies of governments in accordance with changes in the international situation and strategic pattern" (Qian 2005, 2055). Changes in the international environment are important factors for a country in formulating its foreign policies. When studying the report to the 20th CPC National Congress from the perspective of domestic politics, continuity and stability stand out as the predominant features of CPC governance. However, changes are the focus of the report's section on the international situation. These changes become more remarkable when viewed from a historical and comparative perspective.

### 3.1 Uncertainty in the external environment

China's perception of the shifts in the international affairs landscape are easily observed from a historical perspective. Compared with previous reports to the CPC National Congress after the end of Cold War, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress reveals two significant changes. The first is that, when analyzing the global situation, the report does not contain a statement about peace and development being global themes of the times. Prior to the 20th CPC National Congress, this statement had always been present in such reports since the 13th CPC National Congress in 1987.

The report to the 13th CPC National Congress was the first to state that peace and development were themes of the world. The report to the 14th CPC National Congress again stressed that “peace and development are the two major themes of the contemporary world,” and “the theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics was gradually formed and developed... under the historical conditions in which peace and development have become the theme of the times” (Jiang 1992).

Subsequent reports to the CPC National Congress continued to contain such judgments on the international circumstances. As stated in the report to the 15th CPC National Congress, “the current international situation continues to tend to ease in general. Peace and development are the theme of the present times.” The report to the 16th CPC National Congress stated that “peace and development are still the theme of the present times” and “a new world war will not be fought within the foreseeable period. It is possible to strive for a peaceful international environment and a good surrounding environment for a longer period of time.” The report to the 17th CPC National Congress stated that “peace and development are still the theme of the times” and that while “the multi-polarization of the world is irreversible... [t]he balance of international forces is developing in a direction that is conducive to the maintenance of world peace, and the international situation is generally stable.”

The report to the 18th CPC National Congress pointed out that “[t]he world is undergoing major developments, transformation, and adjustment, but peace and development remain the call of our day. The trends of global multi-polarity, economic globalization, IT application, and cultural diversity are surging forward... [and] relative international forces are becoming more balanced.” The report to the 19th CPC National Congress reiterated this assessment.

According to the most recent Party Congress, Chinese leaders' perception of global affairs has changed. During a video call with US President Joseph Biden on March 18, 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “The theme of an era of peaceful development is facing severe challenges, and the world is neither peaceful nor secure” (People's Daily 2022b, 1). From a historical point of view, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress did not contain the assertion that “peace and development are the theme of the times,” nor did it repeat the optimistic and positive assessments previously set forth in prior reports, such as “the overall situation continues to ease,” a new world war “will not be fought within the foreseeable period,” “the balance of international forces is developing in a direction that is conducive to the maintenance of world peace,” “there are more favorable conditions for maintaining



the overall stability of the international situation,” and “relative international forces are becoming more balanced.” Instead, the report stated,

“The historical trends of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit are unstoppable. The will of the people and the general trends of our day will eventually lead to a bright future for humanity. And yet, the hegemonic, high-handed, and bullying acts of using strength to intimidate the weak, taking from others by force and subterfuge, and playing zero-sum games are exerting grave harm.”

The analysis of global affairs in the report to the 20th CPC National Congress revealed that the CPC perception of the international situation is sterner than those of previous such reports.

The second change lies in the report’s perception and assessment of the present period in terms of the strategic opportunities available to China and its development efforts. The report to the 16th CPC National Congress, which was held at the beginning of this century, proposed that for China, “the first two decades of the twenty-first century are a period of important strategic opportunities, which China must seize tightly and which offer bright prospects.” The reports to the 18th and 19th CPC National Congresses both reiterated this concept, i.e., that China was in a period of strategic opportunities. For example, the report to the 18th CPC National Congress includes the following language: “An examination of the present international and domestic environments shows that China continues to be in an important period of strategic opportunities for development, a period in which much can be accomplished.” The report to the 19th CPC National Congress contains a similar assessment: “Both China and the world are in the midst of profound and complex changes. China is still in an important period of strategic opportunity for development; the prospects are bright, but the challenges are severe.”

In contrast, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress pointed out that “our world, our times, and history are changing in ways like never before. ... All of this is posing unprecedented challenges for human society,” “External attempts to suppress and contain China may escalate at any time. Our country has entered a period of development in which strategic opportunities, risks, and challenges are concurrent and uncertainties and unforeseen factors are rising,” and that China must “be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms.” The resolution of the 20th National Congress also stated that “Since entering the new era, the Party and the country have faced a situation of unparalleled complexity, a fight of unparalleled graveness, and tasks of unparalleled difficulty” in promoting reform, development, and stability (People’s Daily 2022c, 2). Changes in China’s perception of global affairs have inevitably led to adjustments in its foreign policy.

### 3.2 Subtle changes in China’s national identity

China is the largest developing country in the world, and this has always been how Chinese leaders have framed China both in terms of national identity and in

declarations made to the rest of the world. With the rise of China's economy and international status, China's international identity has become a topic of debate in the international community (Guo 2022). Many years ago, some countries tried to deny China's developing country status in the World Trade Organization. In 2022, the US Congress also added an amendment to a passed bill, declaring that China is not a developing country (Lee 2022). It can be seen from the report to the 20th CPC National Congress that there have been subtle but significant changes in China's positioning of its own national identity.

Before reform and opening up, China insisted in its foreign relations that "China will always side with the Third World countries, but we shall never seek hegemony over them or serve as their leader" (Deng 1993, 363). When elaborating on major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the concept is "based on our country's positioning as a developing country... while firmly safeguarding the common interests and legitimate rights of developing countries in the international community" (Wang 2017). During the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Plus outreach meeting held in 2018, President Xi emphasized that "[s]ocialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and China's status as the world's largest developing country has not changed. No matter how China develops in the future, it will always belong to developing countries and will firmly support the development of developing countries and will continue to be committed to developing a close partnership with developing countries" (People's Daily 2018b).

Changes in self-identity are also reflected in previous reports to the CPC National Congress. At the beginning of this century, the report to the 16th CPC National Congress twice mentioned support for developing countries and described China as a major developing country twice. The report to the 17th CPC National Congress made similar mentions four times and twice, respectively. The report to the 18th CPC National Congress mentioned supporting and developing relations with other developing countries seven times. When discussing China's own position, although the report emphasized that "China's international status as the world's largest developing country has not changed" and also clearly stated that it is necessary to "promote establishing a new type of major-country relations with long-term, stable and healthy development" and "play the role of a responsible major country and jointly respond to global challenges." The report to the 19th CPC National Congress reiterated that "China's international status as the world's largest developing country has not changed." In addition, it mentioned attaching importance to developing and supporting relations with developing countries five times. It mentioned "major country" seven times, including its statement that "China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance."

In comparison, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress explicitly stated only once that "As a major developing country, China is still in the primary stage of socialism." It mentioned four times the importance of developing relations with developing countries. It mentioned "major country" eight times and emphasized that "We have demonstrated China's sense of duty as a responsible major

country, actively participating in the reform and development of the global governance system.”

China’s status as a major country is reflected in its growing acceptance of responsibility in diplomatic practice. During the General Debate of the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2022, State Councilor and former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi clearly positioned China as “a provider of public goods,” “a defender of the international order,” “a contributor to global development,” and “a builder of world peace” (People’s Daily 2022d, 3). Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Ma Zhaoxu said at a press conference during the 20th CPC National Congress that “China’s international influence, appeal and power to shape have risen markedly. As a staunch supporter of multilateralism, we have participated in global governance with unprecedented breadth, depth and intensity.... China’s image as a responsible major country has been increasingly recognized by the international community” (People’s Daily 2022e, 3). Changes in China’s international identity and positioning not only affect the world’s perception of China but are also bound to be reflected in China’s foreign policy and foreign relations.

### 3.3 New developments in the concept of major country diplomacy

In the globalization era, internal and external connections are deepening. It is necessary not only to view Chinese diplomacy from the perspective of domestic political continuity, but also to observe and understand it from a macro perspective and to adopt a grand diplomacy or overall diplomacy mindset. In the report to the 20th CPC National Congress, the sections about diplomacy are not limited to foreign policy. There are two other areas that are closely related to diplomacy and have received attention. The first concerns security issues. Compared with previous reports, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress added a section entitled “Modernizing China’s National Security System and Capacity and Safeguarding National Security and Social Stability.” The second comprises a new discussion about science, technology, and education.

Scholars have been discussing the overall changes and trends of Chinese politics and foreign policy by comparing the usage of key words in previous reports to their usage in the report to the 20th the CPC National Congress. Statistical analysis of the frequency of the word “security” in these reports reveals a trend of attention to security issues.

Specifically, the term “security” appeared four times (including one instance of “national security”) in the report to the 14th CPC National Congress, six times (including three instances of “national security”) in the report to the 15th CPC National Congress, fourteen times (including three instances of “national security”) in the report to the 16th CPC National Congress, twenty-four times (including five instances of “national security”) in the report to the 17th CPC National Congress, thirty-six times (including four instances of “national security”) in the report to the 18th CPC National Congress, and fifty-five times (including eighteen instances of “national security”) in the report to the 19th CPC National Congress. The report to

the 20th CPC National Congress mentioned “security” ninety-one times (including twenty-nine instances of “national security”).

The increased frequency of “security” in these reports reflects the changing significance of and concern about national security in Chinese politics. The signal sent by these changes is clear: economic development is still the focus of our work, but improving the organization of national security forces and building a national security protection system that is comprehensively linked and efficient are receiving more attention.

The report to the 20th CPC National Congress systematically and comprehensively expounded the security concept of the CPC, elevated national security to “the bedrock of national rejuvenation,” and elevated social stability to “a prerequisite for building a strong and prosperous China.” It not only expounded the concept of overall security in a more comprehensive way, but also emphasized that “We must resolutely pursue a holistic approach to national security and promote national security in all areas and stages of the work of the Party and the country.” The report also mentioned “improving the national security system,” “strengthening our capacity for safeguarding national security,” “enhancing public safety governance” and “improving the social governance system.” This shows that the status of national security in Chinese politics has risen to an unprecedented height.

There are also new discussions about technology and education issues. Since reform and opening up, the Party and the Chinese government have always attached importance to the development of science and technology and the cultivation of talent. An important driving force of China’s reform and opening up is the absorption of advanced science and technology and talent. Deng Xiaoping once said that “Science and technology are primary productive forces” (Deng 1993, 274). The report to the 20th CPC National Congress still emphasized the importance of technology and talent. It stated that “[s]cientific and technological innovation is a powerful driving force for the development and progress of human society,” that “[w]e must regard science and technology as our primary productive force, talent as our primary resource, and innovation as our primary driver of growth,” and that “[w]e will expand science and technology exchanges and cooperation with other countries, cultivate an internationalized environment for research, and create an open and globally-competitive innovation ecosystem.” In addition, the report proposed that “[t]o meet China’s strategic needs, we will concentrate resources on original and pioneering scientific and technological research to achieve breakthroughs in core technologies in key fields. In order to enhance China’s innovation capacity, we will move faster to launch a number of major national projects that are of strategic, big-picture, and long-term importance.” The report’s emphasis on “independent innovation” and “self-reliance of scientific and technological capabilities” is undoubtedly a targeted response to US-led Western countries’ technological restrictions on and decoupling from China. This reflects China’s determination to confront its difficulties and forge ahead in promoting scientific and technological innovation and overcoming restrictions related to key core technologies.

## 4 Expected trends in China's diplomacy

Domestic factors, including the stability of the CPC's leadership core, the high degree of unity of the leading team, and the continuity of guiding ideology, are in stark contrast to the changes and uncertainties in the outside world. Both internal and external factors will compete to shape China's future diplomacy. Viewing the world from their vantage point in China, China's diplomacy and foreign relations demonstrate the following trends and characteristics:

### 4.1 Firmly holding onto China's development goals and path in an uncertain world

Changes on the global stage are unfolding in an unprecedented way, and human society is facing new challenges. Judging by the report to the 20th CPC National Congress, such turbulence in the external world has led China to show more certainty and strategic determination. This indicates that China will meet the uncertainty of the outside world with its own certainty. This is not only reflected in China's domestic politics and development efforts, but also in China's foreign policy and diplomatic practice.

The report to the 19th CPC National Congress and the conclusion of the 16th Plenary Session of 19th CPC Central Committee expounded fourteen and ten principles, respectively, that China would insist on in the future, clearly expressing China's resolve and determination in the path and goals of its development. This is further illustrated by the 20th CPC National Congress report's usage of "uphold" 172 times and of words that express firm will and confidence, such as "must," thirty-nine times. The report reaffirmed China's general tone of seeking progress while maintaining stability, and it sent a clear signal by mentioning that China will "have firm confidence in its path, theory, system, and culture." In addition to "upholding the Four Cardinal Principles," the newly revised constitution of the CPC also states,

"Based on long-term practice, the Party has gained valuable historical experience in the following respects: upholding the Party's leadership, putting the people first, advancing theoretical innovation, staying independent, following the Chinese path, maintaining a global vision, breaking new ground, standing up for ourselves, promoting the united front, and remaining committed to self-reform" (People's Daily 2022f).

China's intent to advance economic development, as well as the CPC's strategic goals and specific steps necessary to achieve them, is clearly and confidently outlined. China's reaffirmation of the goal and path of its development and of the cardinal principles of its domestic politics sends a strong signal of certainty to an uncertain world and provides internal conditions for the continuity and certainty of its diplomacy and foreign policy.

China's foreign policy is, in part, a response to external uncertainties and, as such, intentionally demonstrates steadfast strategic determination. The report to the 20th CPC National Congress outlined the future of China's diplomacy thusly:

“China has always been committed to its foreign policy goals of upholding world peace.... China remains firm in pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace.... China adheres to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in pursuing friendship and cooperation with other countries.... China is committed to its fundamental national policy of opening to the outside world and pursues a mutually beneficial strategy of opening up.... China adheres to the right course of economic globalization.”

The report further stated that China is committed to “assisting other developing countries in accelerating development,” that “China upholds true multilateralism,” and that “China is firm in safeguarding the international system with the United Nations at its core.” These expressions, and the promise that “China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism,” show China's firm will and resolve, which will increasingly be reflected in China's diplomatic practice in the future.

#### **4.2 Remaining committed to enhancing positive interactions with other major countries.**

The China–US relationship is the most important bilateral relationship for not only the two countries, but also the whole world. The uncertainty of the international situation is, to a large extent, caused by strategic adjustment by the US. China firmly opposes the hegemonic practices of the US, but its intent to develop friendly relations between itself and the US is clear. The report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC pointed out that “China works to enhance coordination and positive interaction with other major countries to build major-country relations featuring peaceful coexistence, overall stability, and balanced development.” The term “positive interaction with other major countries” is different from the term “coordination and cooperation with other major countries,” which was used in the report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC. The addition of “peaceful coexistence” in reference to the promotion of the construction of major power relations reflects the Party and the country's understanding of the difficulties in China–US relations. As President Xi Jinping has pointed out, the extent to which China and the US can strengthen communication and cooperation will dictate the level of stability of the world and help promote world peace and development. China is willing to work with the US to advance mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation that benefits both countries (People's Daily 2022g, 1).

On September 19, 2022, when then-State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with representatives of US-China non-governmental organizations in New York, he clarified China's policy toward the US:

First, the prospects of China's own development are certain. Second, China's resolution in reform and opening up remains certain. China will continue to deepen its reform, open wider to the world, establish a new system for higher level openness,

build an open world economy, and further promote economic globalization. Third, China's policy toward the US is certain. Fourth, China's attitude of continuing to strengthen economic and trade cooperation between the two countries is certain. China welcomes the development of US enterprises in China and will continue to provide a market-oriented, internationalized and legalized business environment. China–US economic and trade cooperation should do more addition instead of subtraction, join hands instead of letting go of each other's hands, and tear down walls instead of erecting walls. Fifth, China's willingness to carry out multilateral coordination with the US is certain (People's Daily 2022h, 3).

China–US relations are continuing to decline, and the future is uncertain, but China remains committed to developing positive relations with the US. This is certain and remains unchanged.

### 4.3 Shouldering more responsibility with more proactive diplomacy

The report to the 20th CPC National Congress highlighted changes in China's status and identity. President Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed that a major country should look like a major country; therefore, China will be more active in its diplomacy and participate in international affairs with unprecedented breadth, depth, and strength. The report to the 19th CPC National Congress pointed out that China's path to modernization "offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind." The report to the 20th CPC National Congress reiterated that China "provides more and better Chinese wisdom, Chinese approaches, and Chinese power to solve the common problems facing mankind and make[s] new and greater contributions to the noble cause of human peace and development!"

As for the areas in which China will play a role, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress also clearly stated:

"China is prepared to invest more resources in global development cooperation. It is committed to narrowing the North-South gap and supporting and assisting other developing countries in accelerating development. . . . China plays an active part in the reform and development of the global governance system. . . . It pursues a vision of global governance featuring shared growth through discussion and collaboration . . . promotes greater democracy in international relations and works to make global governance fairer and more equitable. . . . China works to see that multilateral institutions such as the WTO and APEC better play their roles. . . . China is actively involved in setting global security rules, works to promote international security cooperation, and takes an active part in UN peacekeeping operations. China plays a constructive role in safeguarding world peace and regional stability."

On the basis of the Belt and Road Initiative, the concept of comprehensive security, and the idea of community with shared future of mankind, China has proposed the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global

Civilization Initiative. These will be important areas where China can engage in active diplomacy and assume responsibility as a major country.

The characteristics of a major country are not only manifested in the globalization and diversification of the country's interests, but also in the fact that the responsibilities and obligations of a major power extend to the external world and involve many internal aspects. This requires the diplomacy of major powers to coordinate the interests of all parties and policies in various fields. The report to the 20th CPC National Congress repeatedly emphasized the importance of overall planning and coordination and explained how China will facilitate such planning and coordination in various fields.

For instance, the report repeatedly stressed the importance of the Five-Sphere Integrated Plan and the Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy.<sup>7</sup> The CPC repeatedly emphasized the goals of “accelerating the construction of the new development paradigm featuring dual circulation, in which domestic and overseas markets reinforce each other, with the domestic market as the mainstay,” “coordinating the epidemic prevention and control and economic and social development,” “coordinating development and security,” “advancing the rule of law in domestic and foreign-related affairs in a coordinated manner,” and especially “taking coordinated steps to ensure external and internal security, homeland and public security, traditional and non-traditional security, and our own security and common security.”

These strategic priorities suggest that in the era of globalization, China's diplomacy is focused both internally and externally and that various fields are intertwined and interacting, such that one slight move could affect the broader diplomatic landscape. The report also indicated that uncoordinated behavior and inconsistent voices will inevitably appear in the future. Observers should understand that China's diplomacy has multiple stakeholders with diversified perspectives. Diplomats must establish a big picture view of the international arena when implementing policies, and policymakers should increase their efforts to establish centralized and unified leadership as well as top-level policy design and coordination.

#### 4.4 “Chinese characteristics” are more prominent

Major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, a concept proposed by President Xi Jinping at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs after the 18th CPC National Congress, has been China's consistent diplomatic strategy since its introduction. Later, the People's Daily published an editorial that stated that the defining characteristic of China's diplomacy is that “China's diplomacy must adhere to the leadership of the CPC and socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

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<sup>7</sup> The Five-sphere Integrated Plan refers to China's overall plan for building socialism with Chinese characteristics, that is, to promote coordinated progress in the economic, political, cultural, social and eco-environmental fields. The Four-pronged Comprehensive Strategy refers to China's strategic plan for building socialism with Chinese characteristics, that is, to make comprehensive moves to complete a moderately prosperous society in all respects, to further reform, to advance the rule of law, and to strengthen Party self-governance.



The editorial writers also stated that “this is the most fundamental aspect” for China’s current diplomatic work (People’s Daily 2014, 1). The report to the 19th CPC National Congress further stated that “the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China; the greatest strength of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China.” “Uphold[ing] the authority of the CPC Central Committee” and “strengthen[ing] the centralized, unified leadership of the Party on external work” are now emphasized as the overarching principle in China’s diplomacy (People’s Daily 2018c, 3).

The centralized and unified diplomatic leadership of the CPC is embodied in the guiding role that Xi Jinping’s Thought on Diplomacy has played. The *Study Outline on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy* indicates that we should consciously take Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy as primary guidance for China’s diplomatic work (CPC Department of Publicity and PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021, 10). Former Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has proposed that China’s diplomacy should “further unify thoughts and actions with General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important instructions on diplomatic work” (Wang 2021a, 9).

One of the remarkable manifestations of the CPC’s leadership over China’s diplomacy is the rising prominence of “head-of-state diplomacy” or “president diplomacy.”<sup>8</sup> Since the 18th CPC National Congress, President Xi Jinping has made forty-two foreign visits covering sixty-nine countries on five continents and received more than one hundred heads of state and government in China. China’s head-of-state diplomacy surpasses that of the US in terms of the number of countries that the head of state visits each year, the time spent abroad during visits, and the number of foreign heads of government and heads of state received each year (Thomas 2021). After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face diplomacy stagnated. Xi has actively carried out “cloud diplomacy,” speaking with foreign leaders and heads of international organizations 181 times and attending seventy-eight major foreign affairs events via video (People’s Daily 2022e, 3). Through various forms of head-of-state diplomacy, Chinese leaders have engaged with all important regions, countries, and international organizations, built a more comprehensive and solid global partnership network for China, and won the respect, cooperation, and friendship of the world.

<sup>8</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the position of President of the PRC has been held by the Secretary General of the CPC Central Committee, who concurrently holds the position of the Chairman of the Party and State Central Military Commissions. Engaging in summit diplomacy is a function of the president as the head of state, a symbolic role that represents the country and carries out head of state functions in diplomatic activities according to modern diplomatic norms. The president also retains de facto decision-making power as Secretary General of the Party, the leading core of all affairs in China. The combination of the presidential role within the Party and state enhances the role of summit diplomacy in diplomatic protocol and diplomatic effectiveness. Internationally, Xi is referred to as the President of China but domestically is more often referred to as the Secretary General. Conventionally, summit diplomacy (*shounao waijiao*, 首脑外交) refers to both head-of-government and head-of-state diplomacy. After the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, the term “summit diplomacy” was changed to head-of-state diplomacy (*yuanshou waijiao*, 元首外交, *presidential diplomacy*) only, and the term “head-of-government diplomacy” has disappeared from Chinese media.

As the pandemic eased, face-to-face diplomacy gradually resumed. Before and after the 20th CPC National Congress—i.e., from September to December 2022—President Xi Jinping embarked on the first high-level visits since the beginning of the pandemic, traveling from the Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Samarkand to the G20 Summit in Bali and the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Bangkok, and then to the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit in Riyadh. Within one month of the 20th CPC National Congress, foreign leaders, including General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong (October 30–November 2), Pakistani Prime Minister Shabaz Sharif (November 1), Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan (November 2–4), German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (November 4), and others were invited to visit China. There is reason to expect that China's head-of-state diplomacy will also gradually return and play a greater role in China's diplomacy.

With an increase in the scale and diversification of diplomatic methods, the status of head-of-state diplomacy in China's diplomacy will be further enhanced. It will not only steer China's diplomacy, but also become a diplomatic goal itself. According to Wang Yi, China's diplomacy will “spare no effort to serve the head-of-state diplomacy and demonstrate the unique style of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era” (Wang 2021b). The leader of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee has also stated that the CPC's foreign relations will “spare no effort” to “serve and guarantee” the major diplomatic agenda of General Secretary Xi. It is clear that head-of-state diplomacy will play a predominant role in China's overall diplomacy after Xi starts his third president term (People's Daily 2022i, 3).

#### 4.5 Securitization of diplomacy and a more distinctive diplomatic style

The frequent occurrence of the words “national security” in the report to the 20th CPC National Congress has aroused widespread attention from political and academic circles at home and abroad. Although the report emphasizes the need to adhere to reform and opening up and reiterates the importance of economic development, academics have noticed that the emphasis on national security is different than before. For example, during Deng Xiaoping's era, the CPC repeatedly emphasized that “socialist modernization is our greatest political issue” and that “economic issues are the overriding political issues” (Deng 1994, 150, 163, 194, 234). The report to the 20th CPC National Congress elevated national security to the level of “bedrock of national rejuvenation” and declared that national security should be promoted in all areas and stages of the Party's and the country's work. This means many domestic and foreign issues in China will be “securitized” and addressed through security channels.

The emphasis on national security is necessary due to the external environment. It is the CPC's response to the present reality according to its own understanding of the current international environment. Due to this understanding of an uncertain international context, the report to the 20th CPC National Congress mentioned

“struggle” twenty-two times, stating that “all the achievements of the party and the people have been achieved through struggle” and that “dar[ing] to fight and dar[ing] to win [are] the invincible and powerful spiritual force of the Chinese Communist Party.” The party congress agreed to add to the Party constitution a statement on “carrying forward our fighting spirit and building up our fighting ability.” After the 20th Party Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping led the new Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee in paying tribute to the Yan’an Revolutionary Memorial Site. He reviewed the Party’s tenacious fighting spirit and superb fighting ability during the Yan’an period, once again stating that “All comrades in the Party must carry forward the fighting spirit, improve the fighting ability, resolutely overcome all kinds of difficulties and challenges on the way forward, and rely on tenacious struggle to open up new horizons for career development” (People’s Daily 2022j, 1).

New development indicates that this diplomatic style is becoming more prominent. During a group discussion with national political advisors attending the first session of the 14th National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on March 6, 2023, Xi Jinping put forward a 24-character strategy for China’s development—“be calm and maintain determination, seek progress through stability, actively achieve things, unite and dare to struggle” (chénzhū-olengjìng, bǎochídinglǐ, wénzhōngqiújìn, jījìzuowéi, tuánjiēyìzhì, gǎnyúdòuzhèng, 沉着冷静、保持定力、稳中求进、积极作为、团结一致、敢于斗争) (People Daily 2023, 1). While this strategy is not limited to foreign policy, it embodies a remarkable departure from the 24-character foreign policy strategy that Deng Xiaoping proposed after the end of the Cold War. Deng’s strategy calls for China to “observe the developments calmly, secure our own positions, deal with the changes with confidence, keep a low profile, never become the leader, make some contributions” (lèngjìngguānchá, wénzhūzhènjiào, chénzhūoyìngfù, tàoguāngyǎnghuì, juébudāngtóu, yóusuozuowéi, 冷静观察、稳住阵脚、沉着应付、韬光养晦、绝不当头、有所作为) (The editorial group of the study outline for Deng Xiaoping thought on diplomacy 2000, 11). The new strategy, which has attracted instant attention from both home and abroad, heralds proactive active diplomacy with more fighting spirit.

As the main department implementing China’s foreign policy, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs regards “having the courage to fight and being good at fighting” as “the fine tradition and distinctive feature of China’s diplomacy” and “the spiritual character of China’s diplomacy” (People’s Daily 2022e, 3). Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu said at a press conference held during the 20th Party Congress that “in the face of external containment, suppression and unreasonable interference, we have launched a tit-for-tat, firm and forceful fight... to effectively prevent external forces from interfering in Hong Kong affairs and continuously defeat anti-China forces’ attacks and slanders against China and safeguard national interests and dignity.” Looking forward to the future, he said, “In the new journey, China’s diplomacy will continue to carry forward the fighting spirit, improve the ability to fight, and always stand at the forefront of safeguarding national interests and national dignity.” He also said that the struggle will mainly focus on China’s core interests

involving Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, maritime issues, human rights, and others (People's Daily 2022e, 3).

Of course, the battlefield for China's diplomacy is not limited to areas that involve China's territorial sovereignty. As stated in the report to the 20th CPC National Congress, China will defy threats and uphold justice and stand "firmly against all forms of hegemonism and power politics, the Cold War mentality, interference in other countries' internal affairs, and double standards." China opposes "protectionism, the erection of 'fences and barriers,' decoupling, disruption of industrial and supply chains, unilateral sanctions, and maximum-pressure tactics" and "the forming of blocs and exclusive groups targeted against particular countries." These positions reflect China's conception of the future world and its responsibility as a major power.

What sustains optimism is the notion that future diplomatic struggles will be different from those of the Cold War, as large-scale military conflicts are unlikely to occur. Instead, these struggles will be over discourse power or narrative power. This kind of struggle has manifested since the pandemic began, taking place over issues including the naming of the epidemic, the origin of the virus, and the pros and cons of governance. Such struggles are also reflected in the current difficulties in China–US relations.

For example, China does not agree with some in the US who describe the history of win–win cooperation between China and the US as the US "suffering a big loss" and promote an unwarranted narrative of the current bilateral relationship as one of "democracy vs. authoritarianism," as such narratives deliberately amplify the ideological confrontation between China and the US and attack China's political system, development path, and ruling party. The Chinese government is also opposed to defining the current China–US relationship as "strategic competition" because China considers it "beneath a responsible country to use competition as a pretext to smear other countries and restrain their legitimate right to development, even at the expense of global industrial and supply chains" (MFA 2023). China's future diplomatic struggle will also include finding the best or better methods of diplomacy, uncovering what kind of international order works best, discovering true multilateralism, and determining how to manage the differences between the two sides.

Since its founding, the CPC has led the Chinese people through the journey of the PRC's first century and has achieved the first centenary goal. Throughout this process, China's foreign relations and new China's diplomacy have always been important fronts for the Party's cause, accepting the Party's comprehensive, centralized, and unified leadership, making important contributions to the realization of the Party's goals, and accumulating rich experience. Today, China has reached a new starting point. The stage for China's diplomacy has grown: it now holds greater responsibility, is subject to more attention and higher expectations, faces a more complex environment, and is confronted with challenges that are greater and more difficult to predict. As the largest ruling party in the world, the CPC is leading the Chinese people on a new journey into the next century. The 20th CPC National Congress has not only outlined a clear roadmap for the future of China's diplomacy, but also defined a specific style and distinct features for China's future diplomacy. In this sense, the

20th Party Congress is an important milestone, not only in the history of the CPC, but also in the history of Chinese diplomacy.

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