

# From the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CCP to see the world power competition between China and the United States

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## 1. News Highlights

The CCP 20<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress was held in Beijing from October 16 to 22, 2022. Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, delivered a political report on behalf of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Committee members and confirmed his third term as the CCP General Secretary at the end of the Congress. Xi's re-election and control of the Politburo Standing Committee mean that he will remain in power for the next five years and that there will be no drastic changes in China's development direction or foreign policy. In other words, the competition scope between China and the US will still be difficult to mitigate. On November 15, 2022, Xi and US President Joe Biden held bilateral talks at

the G20, stating their respective positions on Taiwan Strait stability in a tit-for-tat manner. But while the bilateral dialogue appeared to be ice-breaking, they failed to reach a clear consensus. This article takes the CCP's 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress as the key point to observe the competition for power between China and the US in the East Asian region and even in the global arena and have a deeper look at the relevant development trend.

## 2. Security Implications

The "Power Transition Theory" uses economic, demographic, and political capability as criteria to measure the strength of power and categorizes the power of the states into four levels: super, strong, secondary, and weak

powers.<sup>1</sup> The Theory suggests that in the governance model of world politics, the most stable model is the alliance formed by superpowers joined by weaker ones that share interests and are satisfied with the status quo. In contrast, when the “challengers” (were lower in power) are dissatisfied with the current distribution of power and become uncooperative with the “defender” (was higher in power), the opportunity to overtake the defender in terms of relative power is most likely to lead to a conflict or war. Based on this Theory, this article analyzes the current competitive situation between China and the US from the Chinese perspective.

### **2-1. China’s dissatisfaction with the international situation has caused turbulence**

The political report of CCP’s 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress revealed its dissatisfaction with the current

international situation and proposed to “proclaim the practice of genuine multilateralism, clearly oppose all hegemonism and power politics, and unwaveringly oppose any unilateralism, protectionism, and bullying.”<sup>3</sup> Although “United States” is not mentioned throughout the report, it is reasonable to interpret the passage as targeting the US from the events or behaviors corresponding to the keywords in the sentences. For example, “hegemonism” has been used to refer to the US and Soviet superpower since the Cold War; “unilateralism” and “protectionism” have also been used to criticize the US for initiating trade sanctions against China after the trade war between the two countries started.

Observing from the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress report, apart from the dissatisfaction with the US, the Chinese side does not want to concede defeat

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1. Ronald L. Tammen, Jacek Kugler, et al., translated by Xiang Jun, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*(Taipei: Ministry of National Defense, History and Politics Editorial Office, 2003) pp. 5-27.
  2. Ronald L. Tammen, Jacek Kugler, et al., translated by Xiang Jun, *Power Transitions: Strategies for the 21st Century*, pp. 28-48.
  3. Xi Jinping, “Upholding the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, Uniting for the Comprehensive Construction of A Modernized Socialist Country: Report at the 20th CCP National Congress(October 16, 2022),” *People’s Daily Online*, October 26, 2022, [http:// politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1026/c1024-32551597.html](http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1026/c1024-32551597.html).

either. Due to the legacy influence of internal political struggle in China, Xi Jinping, as a leader with a high degree of centralized power, has no room to back down, or he may be attacked by the hawks or other potential political factions within the party. Even though the new Politburo Standing Committee at the top of the CCP has been completely cleared of the Jiang Zemin and Communist Youth League factions by the Xi faction, which is the only one in charge, since there are still a large number of middle-ranking cadres from other factions, it is difficult for Xi to clean up every organization from the root to rest easy. Therefore, as Xi cannot retreat from the internal contest or see an opportunity for external reconciliation, he can only maintain a hardline stance. In an irreversible state of competition, the contest between these two powers will only lead to a more volatile world situation.

## **2-2. China's image reshaping and competition with the US for international discourse**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress report,

Xi Jinping mentioned that “(we are) promoting the construction of a common future of humanity and firmly upholding international justice and fairness... We are demonstrating our responsibility as a major power, actively participating in the global governance system reform and construction, and have fully embarked on international combat against the COVID-19 epidemic to win widespread acclaim from the global society. We have significantly elevated our international influence, appeal, and the power to shape.”<sup>4</sup> First of all, China has been emphasizing the term “responsible major power” many times since the Asian financial crisis in 1997, and its three leaders, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, have never let go of their insistence on this international image. During his tenure, Xi accelerated China's infiltration into global organizations, taking advantage of former US President Donald Trump's temporal withdrawal, with the obvious intention of replacing the US in control of the global governance system. This is coupled with moral arguments such as the construction of a

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4. Ditto.

“common future of humanity,” which is an attempt to seize the moral high ground in international politics.

And Xi Jinping, who has continued to stress the move towards “the great revival of the Chinese people” since the 19<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress in 2017, intends to quickly strengthen China’s international image to satisfy the domestic needs of nationalist confidence. However, before the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 2022, China faced the most serious national image blow dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Since China’s suppression of COVID-19 information and the global outbreak could have been caused by the virus leakage from its Wuhan laboratory, China has become the source to blame, which also caused Chinese and other Asian people to be prejudiced as “virus spreaders” by the rest of the world. In response, China has repeatedly countered that the US is the source of the virus through “wolf diplomacy” and highlighted its contribution to international cooperation against the epidemic through “vaccine diplomacy,” which allowed them to boast a “significant increase” in international influence in the report as a result. But these boasting and attempts to boost their image are fruitless as the

Chinese vaccines lack effective protection and have been gradually phased out by the international community.

### 3. Trend Observation

#### 3-1. The US continues blocking power transferred to China

China and the US have gradually moved towards competition instead of cooperation from economic to strategic security aspects. The siege of China has become a cross-party consensus in the US since President Trump proposed the Indo-Pacific strategy and is continued by the Biden administration. The war between Russia and Ukraine that broke out in 2022 is an affirmation of the long-standing Western suspicion of authoritarian states such as China and Russia, especially as a security threat to democracies. Before the war, China and Russia had bilateral leaders’ summit talks during the Beijing Winter Olympics. After the war started, China repeatedly refused to join in condemnation of Russia and opposed sanctions, so there was no room for cooperation between China and the US on the Russia-Ukraine issue. Back to the “Power Transition Theory.” The current situation between the US and China is

indeed in the fundamental conditions of the Theory that are most likely to lead to future conflicts. Therefore, the US cannot give China another chance to overtake US hegemony, lest it really triggers a war that leads to a “transition of power.” In addition to the political and military development, the US is retarding China in terms of economic power. For example, on August 9, 2022, President Joe Biden signed the “Chips and Science Act 2022,” which establishes a 10-year ban on all semiconductor products, technology, and talent exports to China to isolate the country’s semiconductor supply chain.<sup>5</sup> With these actions, the US attempts to prevent China from surpassing it in critical semiconductor technology, which is also related to the ability to manufacture chips essential to weapons. The blockade is not only about the economy but also about national defense and security.

### **3-2. The alliance trend forces small countries to choose sides**

In 2022, the US and China keep forming their respective alliances. Aside from the progress in China-Russia relations, the US continues to organize the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Japan, Australia, and India. Biden also confirmed the establishment of AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership among the US, UK, and Australia, in a call on October 25 after the election of new British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, and that AUKUS will jointly support Ukraine and contend with China.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the horizontal ties between the US and its allies are also being strengthened. On October 22, the closing day of the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress, Japan and Australia signed the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, the first agreement that allowed foreign troops other than the US to present on Japanese soil. The two countries also announced that they would strengthen military cooperation and cooperate in strategic resource areas such as energy.<sup>7</sup> During the November

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5. Pei-Chen Liu, “The US Chip Act and Related Measures Shake the US-China-Taiwan Semiconductor Development Trend,” *Straits Exchange Foundation*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.seftb.org/cp-4-1749-07cd7-1.html>.

6. “British Politics: Prime Minister Rishi Sunak Took Office, ‘Pragmatic to China’ or Continue the Hawkish Diplomacy?” *Radio Free Asia*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/uk-sunak-10272022092745.html>.

7. “Japan and Australia Collaborate Against China after 15 Years: New Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation Signed,” *Central News Agency*, October 22, 2022, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/202210220222.aspx>.

2022 ASEAN Summit, the Japanese and South Korean leaders attended the ASEAN+3 (China/Japan/Korea) Summit, and both expressed the same opinion and stance on the stability of the Taiwan Strait.<sup>8</sup> This is also the first time President Biden participated in the ASEAN Summit during his term of office, which elevated the relationship between ASEAN and the US to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” So even though China established a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with ASEAN in November 2021 before the US did, the US caught up immediately after a year, which underscored ASEAN’s desire not to take sides to bet on either US or China.

With China and the US each taking the lead in forming alliances and competing on an unforeseeable future development, the world will become increasingly confrontational, further squeezing the space of small countries caught in between. The most direct victims are the ASEAN and the Pacific Island countries, which have repeatedly expressed their unwillingness to choose

sides between China and the US. However, the world’s power landscape is an external constraint on individual countries, and each involved country must respond intelligently to maintain its diplomatic independence and room for maneuvering. However, it is still difficult to remain neutral and watchful for a long time.

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(The contents and views in the assessments are the personal opinions of the author, and do not represent the position of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research.)

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8. “China Was There! Fumio Kishida Stresses the Importance of Peace and Stability in the Taiwan Strait in ASEAN+3 Summit,” *FTVnews.com*, November 12, 2022, <https://www.ftvnews.com.tw/news/detail/2022B12W0141>.