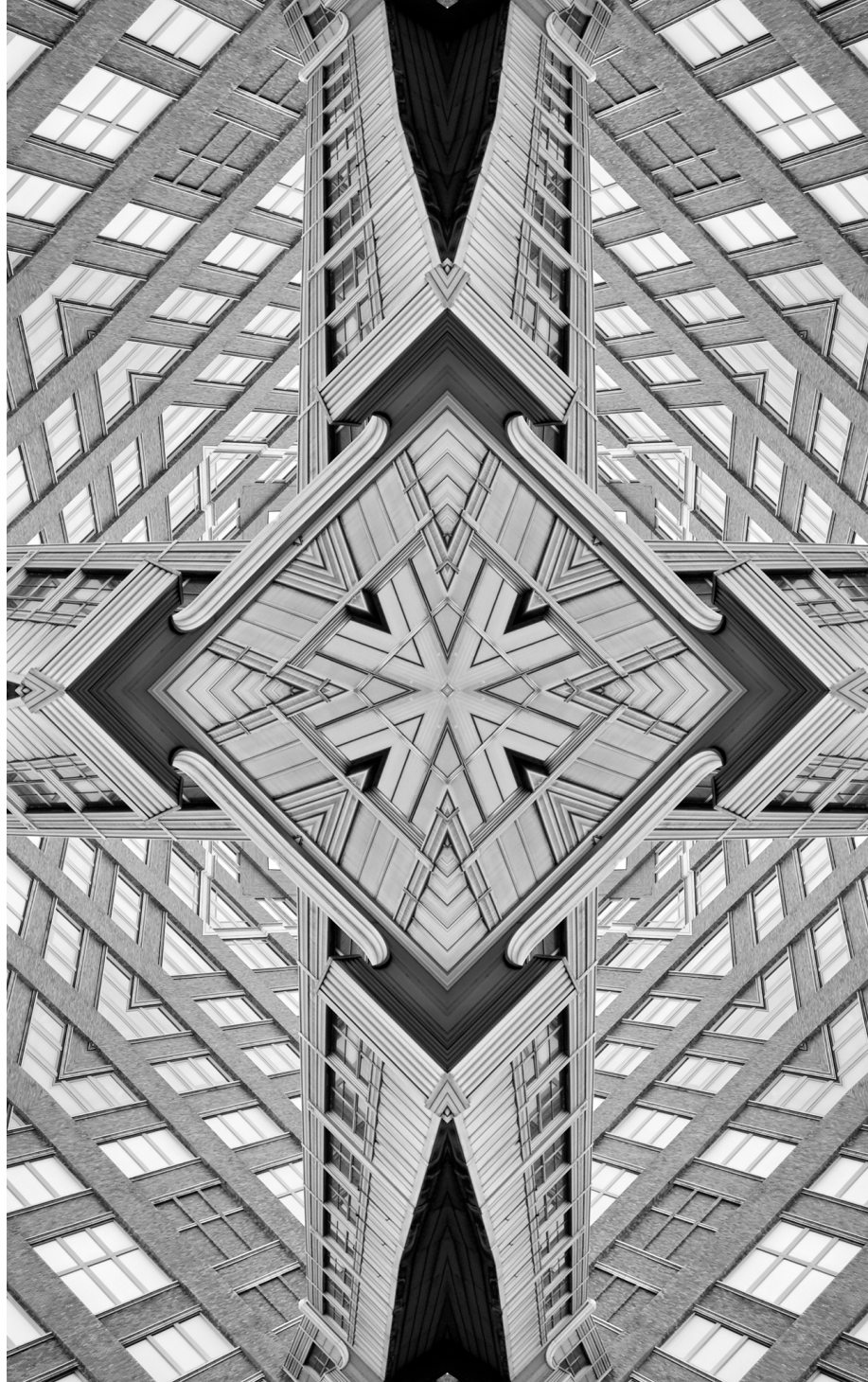


Issue

Brief

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The 20th Party Congress and China's New Roadmap

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Abstract

The 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2022 and the subsequent leadership reshuffle gave a new mandate to a ruling elite that will sit at the helm till 2027. It happened at a time when the CPC is facing strong headwinds, among them a tech war with the United States (US) and a downturn in the domestic economy as a result of President Xi Jinping's 'zero-COVID-19' policy. The CPC saw the protests that ensued as the handiwork of 'hostile Western forces' keen to force a regime change in China. Following the Congress, the themes of self-reliance in science and technology, and national security are set to dominate the CPC's agenda in Xi Jinping's third term in office. This brief unpacks the new ecosystem that China plans to build amid its technology war with the US, examines the state of China's national security in the aftermath of the COVID-19 protests, and demonstrates how both these factors have shaped China's leadership transition.

China's Challenges

The 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) took place in October 2022 amid great challenges facing the country. The strict implementation of a ‘zero-COVID-19’ policy (now rescinded) had a profound effect on economic outcomes including employment. Researchers at Peking University have estimated that under the COVID-19-induced lockdowns in 2022, around 92 million—roughly 12 percent of the nation’s working population—had become unemployed.¹ In 2022, 87 of China’s top 100 cities ranked by GDP, imposed lockdowns to respond to the pandemic, resulting in a huge hit to the economy.² In 2022, China’s economy grew by a low 3 percent, well below the target of 5.5 percent, making it one of the worst performances in nearly four decades.

At the Party Congress, President Xi Jinping noted that the global landscape had changed drastically, due to which attempts were being made by external forces to “blackmail, contain, blockade,” and “exert maximum pressure” on China.³ He also said that the mechanisms for implementing the policy of ‘One Country, Two Systems’ in Hong Kong and Macao were not well-developed, due to which China faced grave challenges to its national security. Thus, the subjects of self-reliance in science and technology, and national security have emerged as the key themes that will guide Xi’s third term as China’s president.⁴ These themes are now being reflected in China’s policy and its choice of personnel.

“At the Party Congress, President Xi noted how the global landscape has changed drastically.”

The West's Response to China

During the last Party Congress, when Xi alluded to the “drastically changed international landscape” that led to the nation’s ‘containment,’ he was referring to the altered dynamics between China and the West.^{a,5} The West, which contributed to China’s rise in the last four decades by allowing it access to advanced knowhow and capital, was now seeing China in a new light.⁶ Since the 1990s, US policy on China has been to engage with it in scientific, cultural, and educational fields in the hope that it would join the fold of democracies.⁷ However, the engagement between the West and China began to change with the latter’s rise. During the Obama administration (2009-2017), worries about China’s rise brought in a new focus on strengthening the Asia–Pacific.⁸ Since the Trump administration, there has been increased competition in technology. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan underscored the requirement to impose export restrictions on critical technology that would blunt national security threats from China.⁹ Taking its cue, the Netherlands and Japan too, announced export curbs on semiconductor technology.¹⁰ Through these restrictions, the US endeavours to counter China’s military–civilian fusion strategy, which seeks to aid the modernisation of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) by ensuring access to sophisticated technology using private firms as conduit.¹¹

When Xi talks about ‘external drivers’ blocking China’s rise, he alludes to the technology war between China and the US, which blew up just ahead of the 20th Party Congress. The US made it more difficult for China to access semiconductors or the materials required for its manufacture; more importantly, it barred US nationals from working for a Chinese entity involved in such equipment manufacture, and from sharing technical knowhow.

Investments in Chinese companies have also been closely scrutinised, especially in hi-tech sectors. A February 2023 report by the Center for Security and Emerging Technology, a Georgetown University think tank, noted that Chinese companies involved in the development of artificial intelligence (AI) had raised US\$110 billion, out of which 37 percent (US\$40.2 billion) had been put in by US investors between 2015 and 2021.¹² Without mentioning China, but citing “geopolitical tensions,” the EU’s Economic Security strategy has been mulling curbs on outward investment by European companies in quantum technology, advanced semiconductors, AI, and key fields where technologies have military applications.¹³

a For China, this means the United States and its allies.

The American Department of Defense is augmenting the investment blacklist for its citizens to include more Chinese companies suspected to have ties with the PLA (Table 1).¹⁴

Table 1: Chinese Companies with Ties to PLA on US DoD Investment Blacklist

Names	Sector/ nature of business
Aerospace CHUAV Co Ltd, Aviation Industry Corporation of China Ltd, China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation Ltd	Aerospace, aviation
China Railway Construction Corporation Ltd	Railway, infrastructure contractor
China National Chemical Corporation Ltd	Agro-chemicals, petroleum processing for military sectors
DJI Technology	Drones
BGI Genomics	Biopharma
CloudWalk Technology Co Ltd	Artificial intelligence
Zhejiang Dahna Technology Co., Ltd	Surveillance equipment
China Marine Information Electronics Company Ltd	Electronics defence equipment
China State Shipbuilding Corporation Ltd	High-tech maritime vessel manufacturing
Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd	Information and communications technology
Zhonghang Electronic Measuring Instruments Company Ltd	Electronic measuring instruments
Inner Mongolia First Machinery Group Co., Ltd	Manufacturer for military
Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation	Semiconductor foundry company

Source: Department of Defense ¹⁵

The West's Response to China

This means that US citizens will not be permitted to purchase or sell publicly traded securities in companies like DJI Technology and Zhejiang Dahua Technology that manufacture drones and surveillance kits, respectively, CRRC Corporation Ltd that makes railway transit equipment, and BGI Genomics Co Ltd that manages a large gene databank.¹⁶ These are not randomly selected but singled out by President Xi as sunshine sectors and included in his 'China Manufacturing 2025' plan.¹⁷ Under this project, China aims at building dominance in production of key segments like next-generation information technology, high-end numerical control machinery and robotics, aerospace and aviation equipment, maritime engineering equipment and high-tech maritime vessel manufacturing, sophisticated rail equipment, energy-saving vehicles, electrical equipment, agricultural machinery and equipment, new materials, and biopharmaceuticals and high-performance medical devices by 2025.¹⁸

“When Xi speaks of ‘external drivers’ blocking China’s rise, he alludes to the technology war between China and the US.”

Creating an Ecosystem for Tech Self-Reliance

The CPC perceives that the US government is aiming to derail China’s development by targeting three critical pillars—exports to the US, Western technology, and capital—which had earlier propelled China’s ascent as the world’s second largest economy.¹⁹ The CPC also accuses the US of enticing other nations to deny China technology to contain it. Chinese media have claimed that the Joe Biden administration has reached an agreement with Japan and the Netherlands to restrict exports of some advanced chip-making machinery to China.²⁰

Domestic substitution a key goal for China’s tech sector

Confronted by an American pull-out, China now seeks to create a domestic ecosystem to spur innovation and self-reliance in technology. This has become the top priority for the Chinese elite as evidenced from a series of meetings at the highest levels of the CPC. On 31 January 2023, President Xi addressed a Politburo meeting where he warned that China will face the spectre of being throttled by other nations if it did not hasten the pace of developing technological self-reliance, pitching for the creation of a “new development structure” (xīn fāzhǎn géjú [新发展格局]).²¹ The CPC is increasingly involving its academia in this endeavour for domestic substitution. On 21 February 2023, Gong Qihuang, a physicist and the president of Peking University, attended a Politburo meeting convened to chart the roadmap for achieving self-reliance in science and technology.²²

There are plans to improve basic scientific research by creating more research centres for physics, chemistry, and biology, and through the establishment of a national laboratory system. It has been resolved to diversify funding sources for basic research through tax incentives for companies, and by encouraging corporate groups and private donors to start ‘science prizes’ to nurture talent.²³

The education system has become a focus in the China–US technology rivalry. In the long term, China plans to prioritise basic science subjects at the levels of middle school and college to “create a large talent pool to address China’s strategic needs.”²⁴ Beyond school education, the CPC wants to cultivate China’s youth who have the potential to become scientists.²⁵

Creating an Ecosystem for Tech Self-Reliance

Physical infrastructure for scientific development

President Xi has underscored the need to create a high-quality talent pool, for which efforts are now underway to build a commensurate ecosystem.²⁶ In 2022, the Shenzhen Development and Reform Commission announced plans to provide subsidies for production, research, and development of sophisticated chips, which have been affected by the US trade curbs.²⁷ Under the 14th Five-Year Plan, China is set to build around 220 high-technology zones across the country by 2025, with the aim of making breakthroughs in important technologies and produce goods that are globally competitive.²⁸ Hong Kong, which has been grappling with retaining bright minds in the aftermath of a crackdown on civil society, has announced the ‘Top Talent Pass Scheme’ under which two-year visas could be granted to those having an annual income of HK\$2.5 million (US\$318,500), or having graduated from one of the world’s top 100 universities and with at least three years of work experience.²⁹

More capital for firms that contribute to strategic goals

The CPC’s efforts at creating a ‘red-capital ecosystem’ have gathered steam in recent years. In 2019, for instance, the Shanghai Science and Technology Board started operations for facilitating finance into companies in high-tech and strategic emerging sectors, and the number of listings of such companies has increased from 25 to more than 300.³⁰ In November 2021, the Beijing Stock Market commenced trading with the objective of funnelling funds into innovation-driven companies. In November 2022, the vice-chairperson of the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), Fang Xinghai, reiterated that private equity firms and venture capital investment must fund technological innovation by financing companies associated with semiconductors, new energy, computing, and pharmaceuticals.³¹

Yi Huiman, chairman of CSRC, called for capital markets to “guide funds” towards companies in “science and technology innovation.” China’s securities regulator has plans to classify initial public offerings (IPOs) into three categories: supported, prohibited, and restricted.³² IPOs that will be ‘supported’ include integrated circuits and advanced biomedical research; the ‘prohibited’ category encompasses quasi-finance companies; and the ‘restricted’ category also covers companies dealing in furniture, clothing merchandise, and fast-food restaurant chains. ‘Restricted’ companies can be accepted normally but are not

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encouraged, whereas ‘supported’ businesses can be reviewed immediately and can go public as soon as the audit is finished.³³

In his address at the Party Congress, President Xi made a pitch that the “sons and daughters” of China must focus their energies on “national rejuvenation”, which is the CPC’s project for restoring the nation’s historic greatness.³⁴ President Xi conceptualises the Chinese race as one, regardless of individual nationality, and hopes that his nationalist pitch strikes a chord for those who are keen on contributing to a “rising China.”³⁵ A debate is on in China as to whether it can leverage its immense talent pool who are educated abroad for the nation’s self-reliance mission. This is seen in Xi’s exhortation that while science has no boundaries, scientists have a motherland.³⁶

In 2022, Xi wrote a public letter to students from Nanjing University who had returned from educational institutions abroad, that they must serve the nation and emulate Li Siguang and Cheng Kaijia.³⁷ Li Siguang was a geologist who played an important role in oil exploration, while Cheng Kaijia was a nuclear physicist who worked on China’s atomic programme.³⁸ The eulogisation of Cheng is particularly important since there are parallels between now and the China of the 1960s when it conducted its first nuclear test after the withdrawal of Soviet assistance to its development programme. In the midst of the Sino-American tech competition, there seems to be some vindication for Xi after biologist Nieng Yan announced her decision to quit Princeton University in the US and move to China to work for a research and development centre set up by the Shenzhen local government. Her decision caused a stir on Chinese social media,³⁹ and her return is being perceived as an act of patriotism amid the US–China tech war. She has become an important icon in China’s self-reliance mission.

At a time when the Chinese elite are discussing the restructuring of the party and government organisations, both Xi and the nation’s scientific community have demanded that the system for promoting science and technology be overhauled. At another meeting of the Politburo on ‘reform plan for the party and state institutions,’ Xi urged that efforts to promote the development of science and technology must be coupled with ensuring that state funding for innovation does not get stolen or misappropriated.⁴⁰ China set up the National Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund, popularly dubbed the ‘Big Fund,’ in 2014 for supporting the country’s domestic semiconductor industry

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and reducing dependence on foreign suppliers. However, several former top executives of the fund were arrested on charges of corruption, including its former head, Ding Wenwu. The Chinese Academy of Sciences is seeking a greater role for the party in science and technology. It has advocated that a 'leading small group' be revived to counter the technology curbs, in the hope that the group functions as a coordinating body to deal with important policy areas that involve competing sections of the bureaucracy. The group will, in this way, be better placed to help China develop its domestic semiconductor industry.⁴¹ Thus, in its drive for self-reliance, China is creating an ecosystem that will ensure capital flows to the desired sectors, and, in the long run, create human capital that can steer innovation. The pitch for increasing party oversight in tech development will mean better coordination and management of state innovation funding, and more party control over the direction of national strategic research.

“In its drive for self-reliance, China is creating an ecosystem that will ensure capital flows to the desired sectors and create human capital that can steer innovation.”

Reordering National Security

On China's national security, President Xi's assessment is that the systems for safeguarding the same were inadequate, and that the capacity to respond to major risks is not up to mark.⁴² Most recently, when public discontent brewed over the strict enforcement of its COVID-19 prevention and control policy and its ill-effects on the economy, student demonstrations in major cities were reminiscent of the 1989 Tiananmen uprising against the CPC.⁴³ The difference between the earlier mobilisations over localised matters, and the 2022 demonstrations was that for the first time since 1989, protestors questioned the CPC's political dominance. The success of the student-led protests led to the realisation that the CPC does yield to agitations, and that people were increasingly hitting the streets to voice their grievances. In February 2023, senior citizens in Wuhan protested against a cut in their medical benefits after the government announced its decision to reform the public health insurance system.⁴⁴

China's national security establishment has blamed external forces for stoking protests in China. During a meeting on 29 December 2022, the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission warned that it was paramount to safeguard national security and social stability, since external forces could use the chaos caused by COVID-19 (abandoning zero-COVID curbs) to infiltrate, sabotage, and disrupt social order.⁴⁵ This apprehension was subsequently reinforced by the developments in Iran where women protested against the religious order on compulsory headscarves. Qiu Wenping, director of the Religious Studies Research Office of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, observed that the Islamic Revolution had transformed the 'westernisation' of Iran's society to a culture of resistance to the West.⁴⁶ In turn, the US retaliated with sanctions, which affected the livelihoods of the Iranian people. Qiu added that internal and external forces took advantage of the protests over headscarves to attack Iran and that the youth would inevitably resist discipline, especially when experiencing economic difficulties. The comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the US were intended to aggravate public dissatisfaction, then instigate a colour revolution through public opinion hegemony.⁴⁷

An article in the CPC's journal, *Qiushi*, urged the establishment to pay attention to educational institutions. It stated that colleges and universities were at the forefront of ideological work, and warned that if the party failed to dominate propaganda and occupy the ideological position, then others might move in.⁴⁸ The CPC has turned its focus to tackling unemployment. Local authorities in

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cities like Shanghai, Dalian, Tianjin and Wuhan have pledged to implement a “dynamic zero-unemployment policy”, with Shanghai mayor Gong Zheng saying that “as long as one person in a family is working, they will have hope.”⁴⁹ China’s provincial governments plan to increase recruitment of bureaucrats as the country seeks to bolster employment to help drive economic recovery. The governments of Gansu and Yunnan provinces, as well as those of the Guangxi Zhuang and Inner Mongolia autonomous regions, plan to hire 50 percent more civil servants than last year, with Gansu planning an 80 percent increase—the most by any of China’s provincial regions.⁵⁰

The CPC’s mission for greater self-reliance and its worries over national security have reflected in its choice of personnel in the leadership transition. An article in the Chinese state media elaborates on the leadership selection, stating that the elite was selected through interviews with several inspection teams dispatched by President Xi, who headed a committee for the Party Congress. It added that the new elite was selected on their “ability” to combat Western sanctions and protect national security.⁵¹ Indeed, the Party is promoting more technocrats with backgrounds like space, nuclear power and the environment into the party’s highest governing bodies—the Politburo and the Central Committee.

In the current 24-member Politburo, Ma Xingrui and Yuan Jiajun worked on China’s space programme before they entered public life.⁵² Li Ganjie and Chen Jining have a master’s degree in nuclear reactor engineering and a doctorate in environmental engineering from Imperial College London, respectively. Zhang Guoqing, meanwhile, helmed China North Industries—China’s biggest defence conglomerate, whereas Yin Li is a public health expert. In the Central Committee, 29 members are from the Chinese academies of sciences and engineering.

Xi’s work report aims at building the PLA into a world-class force and “expanding its capabilities into new domains”—this reflects in the composition of the Central Military Commission (CMC). The commission’s vice-chair Zhang Youxia earlier worked in developing advanced military equipment, and CMC member and China’s Minister for National Defence Li Shangfu has a background in space programme and has also served in the Strategic Support Force, which is tasked with warfare in space, cyber, and electronics.⁵³

Reordering National Security

On national security, there has been a trend towards greater securitisation among the upper ranks of the CPC, and more centralisation of powers. In a first, Chen Wenqing, former head of China's Ministry of State Security, has found a berth in the Politburo. He has also found a place in the Central Secretariat, which manages day-to-day Party affairs. In another first, Wang Xiaohong, senior police officer who had worked in the public security bureau, has been assigned to the Central Secretariat. Moreover, under the initiative to reform Party and state institutions, proposed changes seek to hive off the Ministry of Public Security (tasked with oversight of law-enforcement) and Ministry of State Security (China's civilian intelligence agency) from the State Council, and put them under a new outfit called the Internal Affairs Committee, which will be directly under the Central Committee.⁵⁴ This reorganisation of the security apparatus represents a greater concentration of power in the hands of Xi.

“CPC's mission for greater self-reliance and its worries over national security are reflected in its choice of personnel.”

In July 2023, Germany released its strategy on China that opened by noting how the latter has changed, necessitating a new approach by the West.⁵⁵ At around the same time, President Xi had spoken about a “drastically transformed international landscape,” which almost mirrors the German assessment. The German paper warns that China has been pursuing greater economic independence while deepening asymmetrical dependencies overseas.⁵⁶ The approach of Western nations led by the US has been to ring-fence critical technologies that have military applications so that China does not acquire an edge. They also seek to cut off funds to Chinese firms to reduce the pace of innovation in strategic sectors.

In turn, Xi has pitched the campaign for the ‘new development structure’ (xīn fāzhǎn géjù) to counter the West. First, China’s new development structure focuses on improving physical infrastructure on science and technology. Second, to offset the West’s efforts to retard physical capital formation, China is banking on its state capacity to steer capital into innovation, and hoping to advantageously put to use the savings habit of its citizens. According to academic Keyu Jin, Chinese households on average save 30 percent of their income as compared with their Western counterparts that manage barely 3 percent.⁵⁷ China is working towards accumulating human capital in strategic sectors by using the nationalism card, and providing monetary incentives to draw talent for innovation. Thus, the attempt to consolidate the foundation of science and technology has resulted in a greater number of technocrats being inducted into the upper echelons of the power structure.

Amid China’s tensions with the West, President Xi’s work report at the Party Congress emphasised the need to defend ‘development interests.’ To push scientific innovation and attain breakthroughs will require a long gestation period, which means that China seeks to trade prosperity to build self-reliance. This is evident from the forecasts on the Chinese GDP which is projected to increase by 5.2 percent in 2023 and 4.5 percent in 2024.⁵⁸ As such, a transformation in a nation whose elite seek legitimacy through delivering economic prosperity will have implications for political stability. The induction of those with law-enforcement backgrounds aims to boost the Party’s proficiency in managing security amid persisting geopolitical tensions.^{ORF}

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