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Basic Analysis of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: (1) Xi Jinping's Declaration of the Dawn of a New Era

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The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (hereafter referred to as the “19th CPC National Congress”) was held from October 18 to 24, 2017 and was where a new leadership structure for the next five years was announced. At the 19th CPC National Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping’s power and authority were commended, the dawn of the “Post-Deng Xiaoping Era” was declared, and China’s national strategy for the next 30 years was presented.

This paper seeks to analyze Xi Jinping’s speech delivered at the 19th CPC National Congress and shed light on the theoretical and ideological standpoints of the Communist Party of China (CPC) today, as well as the strategic vision presented by these standpoints.

As the CPC is a Marxist political party, it places emphasis on theories. Even when it comes to practical policies, it is difficult for the CPC to implement policies without grounding them within a broad theoretical framework. China has long been said to be experiencing a dilution of ideology. However, to the CPC, ideology is an indispensable element for the organization to function. Understanding the theories and ideologies of the CPC as an organizational language is essential to learning how the CPC captures the current situation and how it sets its goals and challenges.

General Xi Jinping’s speech, based on the 32,000-character report titled “Securing a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Embarking on a Journey to Fully Build a Modern Socialist China,” spanned three and a half hours.

While this report was certainly very long, it is not necessarily of an unprecedented length for a National Congress report. Based on the author’s calculations, these were the lengths of the reports delivered at previous National Congress sessions: 26,280 characters at the 14th CPC National Congress, 28,338 characters at the 15th CPC National Congress, 28,127 characters at the 16th CPC National Congress, 27,999 characters at the 17th CPC National Congress, and 29,067 characters at the CPC 18th National Congress. Hence, even though this report has been longer than previous ones, reports of the National Congress have traditionally been of considerable length to begin with.

A New Era of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

General Secretary Xi Jinping declared that “socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era.” Thanks to the hard work it has put in since the reform and opening up of the economy, China has developed into a major power. Under the governance of the CPC, China has “stood up, grown rich, and become strong.” As a result, he says, China has stepped into a new phase.

According to Xi, the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics is: (1) an era in which it will continue to strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics; (2) an era in which it will secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, and build a modernized socialist superpower; (3) an era in which the goal of common prosperity is gradually achieved.

What do these expressions mean? “Socialism with

Chinese characteristics” is a phrase used to describe Chinese socialism after the policy of opening up and reform was put in place by Deng Xiaoping, and it mainly encompasses the opening up of the economy to external parties and introducing market economics, thereby modernizing society while retaining political power under the CPC. With the words “an era in which it will continue to strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics,” Xi has indicated the succession and continuance of these results of reform and opening up of the country.

Next, a “moderately prosperous society” is the vision of society that Deng Xiaoping established as the goal for Chinese modernization. It refers to a society where all the people have attained a certain level of wealth, and the society is accordingly prosperous. Former General Secretary Jiang Zemin first used the expression “building a moderately prosperous society,” and he established the timeline for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by the year 2020 (16th CPC National Congress). At the 18th CPC National Congress, then General Secretary Hu Jintao spoke about completing the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects (here, the Chinese word for “completing” is a combination of the words “build” and “complete”), suggesting that China has entered the final phase in the building of a moderately prosperous society. In this recent speech delivered by General Secretary Xi, he indicated that they are approaching the completion of this moderately prosperous society in all respects.

This time, Xi not only laid out, once again, the goal of completing the building of a moderately prosperous society, but he also presented the goal beyond that—building a modernized socialist power in all respects. This was the first time the expression “modernized socialist strong power” had been used in an official context. Until now, the primary expression used had been “modernized socialist country.” The shift from “country” to “strong power” hints at how China’s goal has grown more ambitious than before.

In addition, General Secretary Xi has also begun to

talk about the gradual realization of “common prosperity.” Previously, Deng Xiaoping had been opposed to egalitarianism, advocating the idea of having those with the potential of becoming wealthy work hard and get rich first (“Let some people get rich first”) and focusing on development over eliminating disparity. Leaders who came after Deng Xiaoping had basically continued to follow this path that he had set out. On the other hand, Xi is now suggesting that he will now begin gradually to tackle the problem of wealth distribution in China.

Evolution of the Principal Contradiction

In such a new era, the principal contradiction facing society has already undergone a transformation; the current contradiction lies “between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing need for a better life.” The principal contradiction confronting society is an important concept in the theory of the CPC, and we could say that the task of identifying the principal contradiction also offers a clue to challenges to be addressed and which the Party places emphasis on.

During the Mao Zedong era, class antagonism was considered to be the principal contradiction. Soon after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the principal contradiction, amidst the move toward socialism in China, was the contradiction between the proletariat and capitalist classes. In tandem with the basic completion of the shift toward socialism, the principal contradiction was positioned at one point as the contradiction between the demand of the people for rapid economic and cultural development and the capability of the current economy and culture to satisfy the needs of the people (in other words, the delay in productivity). However, Mao Zedong was not satisfied with this, and he redefined the principal contradiction as the contradiction between the proletariat and capitalist classes. If the principal contradiction is a confrontation between the proletariats and the capitalists, that conflict

will be a class war, and this war will be waged intensely. We could say that this was the premise behind the conflicts and tensions that pervaded society during the Mao Zedong era.

Deng Xiaoping changed the definition of the principal contradiction, establishing it as the contradiction “between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social productivity.” Based on this redefinition, economic development was positioned as the greatest challenge faced by the CPC. After Deng Xiaoping redefined the principal contradiction, the respective leaders who came after him have basically continued using similar expressions. Former General Secretary Jiang stated clearly at the 15th CPC National Congress that “the principal contradiction in society is the one between the growing material and cultural needs of the people and the backwardness of production. This principal contradiction will remain throughout the process of China's primary stage of socialism and in all activities of society.”

Now, what does the new definition by Xi signify? It probably signals the end of the Deng Xiaoping era when the greatest challenge faced by the country was its backwardness in productivity, and the dawn of a new era. The fact is that the principal contradiction in this era has been established as the improvement in the quality of life and the elimination of regional and class disparity. Deng Xiaoping had been opposed to egalitarianism, advocating the idea of having those with the potential of becoming wealthy work hard and get rich first (“Let some people get rich first”) and chose a path that prioritized development over eliminating disparity. While China succeeded in achieving economic development thereafter, its society experienced growing disparity and inequality. After the Hu Jintao administration, the CPC leadership came to a gradual realization of this problem, but they failed to tackle it in earnest. Hence, General Secretary Xi has indicated that this will be one of the Party’s challenges going forward.

However, a question remains. The redefinition of the principal contradiction could possibly be connected to a redefinition of the current phase of theoretical Chinese socialism. To the extent that China’s self-recognition as a poor country lacking in productivity is gradually receding, it would not be strange even if changes were to emerge in its self-recognition as a developing country. In this report, however, General Secretary Xi stated at the same time, “We must recognize that the evolution of the principal contradiction facing Chinese society does not change our assessment of the present stage of socialism in China. The basic dimension of the Chinese context—that our country is still and will long remain in the primary stage of socialism—has not changed. China’s international status as the world’s largest developing country has not changed.”

This contradicting description expresses the current situation, where despite a dramatic change in their definition of self, they have not yet completely embraced their new position. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, until now, China has been consistent in creating an image of “a China that stands on the side of developing countries.” China is, after all, the largest developing country in the world, and China stands united with other developing countries in opposition against the developed countries. To protect this image, it is unlikely that China will be able to completely throw off its image as a developing country. The second reason is conformity with the definitions set forth by Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. In particular, Deng Xiaoping spoke about the continuation of the primary stage of socialism for 100 years; regardless of how powerful Xi is, he was probably not able to set out a completely new point of view that is misaligned with that of his predecessors.

Presentation of Timeline and the Two “15 Years”

The historical mission of the CPC in the new era is to realize the greatest dream of the Chinese people, which is a grand national rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In

his report, General Secretary Xi expressed with confidence, “Today, we are closer, more confident, and more capable than ever before of making the goal of national rejuvenation a reality.”

Until now, General Secretary Xi has spoken constantly about the two centenary goals. These are: (1) to build a moderately prosperous society with double the gross domestic product (GDP) and income of residents in the urban and rural areas than in 2010 figures by the 100th anniversary of the founding of CPC (2021); and (2) to build a modernized socialist country that is wealthy, powerful, democratic, civilized, and harmonious, and to attain the standards of a medium-level developed country by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (2049).

By incorporating the year 2021 into consideration, General Secretary Xi clarified the strategic vision after 2020 for the first time in his address. According to General Secretary Xi, the five years from the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017 to the 20th CPC National Congress in 2022 is the period when the two centenary goals intersect and an important period for completing the building of a moderately prosperous society as well as moving onto a new path toward becoming a modernized socialist country. We could say that he presented a long-term vision aimed at achieving these goals.

The first is the period from 2017 to 2022, which will be a fight towards the completion of a moderately prosperous society in all respects. After the establishment of a modernized and moderately prosperous society, the goal will move towards becoming a modernized socialist superpower in all respects. This is the development strategy of a new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The course to be taken after 2020 is divided into two phases. The first phase is the period from 2020 to 2035. During this period, China will work hard for further 15 years, building on the foundation of a moderately

prosperous society in order to achieve its goal of socialist modernization. Until then, it will significantly enhance its economic and technological prowess and become a leading innovation-oriented country. Furthermore, it will complete the establishment of a constitutional state, attain a basic level in the modernization of the state governance system and capabilities, increase the percentage of middle-class citizens, significantly reduce development disparity between the urban and rural areas and disparity in living standards between citizens of the country, and step out onto the road toward common prosperity for all the people.

The second phase is the period from 2035 to 2050. China will continue to strive for another 15 years upon the basic foundation of modernization and complete the building of a modernized socialist society that is wealthy, powerful, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful. When that time comes, China would have realized the modernization of its state governance system and capabilities and become a global leader in the respects of comprehensive national power and international influence. Furthermore, by that time, it would have basically achieved the goal of common prosperity for all the people; its citizens will enjoy a life of happiness and security, and the Chinese nation will stand confidently and with strong morale among the nations of the world.

The vision of China in 2050 presented in this address is an ambitious one that takes a step further than the future vision outlined in the two centenary goals. The vision of becoming a global leader with comprehensive national power and international influence is an even higher goal than that of becoming a medium-level developed country. On top of that, the basic realization of common prosperity signifies the correction of inequality, such as the disparity between the wealthy and the poor. This long-term vision is a very ambitious one, suggesting that by the year 2050, China aims to become a superpower that is on par with, or surpassing, the

United States not only in economic terms, but in all other respects including international influence, military power, and quality of the people's lives.

14-Point Basic Policy

General Secretary Xi proposed a 14-point basic policy as the CPC's strategy for the new era, aimed at achieving the abovementioned goals. In summary, these are: (1) ensuring party leadership over all work; (2) committing to a people-centered approach; (3) continuing to comprehensively deepen reform; (4) adopting a new vision for development; (5) seeing that the people run the country (making the people the master of the country); (6) ensuring every dimension of governance is law-based; (7) upholding core socialist values; (8) ensuring

and improving living standards through development; (9) ensuring harmony between humans and nature; (10) pursuing a holistic approach to national security; (11) upholding absolute party leadership over the people's armed forces; (12) upholding the principle of "one country, two systems" and promoting national reunification; (13) promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind; and (14) exercising full and rigorous governance over the Party (rigorous self-government by the Party). The specific policies related to these 14 points will be covered by the author in a separate paper.

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