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Xi Jinping's Political Victory and 'Smart' Reunification Strategy: Implications of the 20th CPC National Congress on Cross-Strait Relations

Anthony Toh Han Yang and Jonghyuk Lee



The Brandenburg-class frigate, FGS Bayern. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

SYNOPSIS

By scoring an unprecedented third term and installing loyalist cronies within the top decision-making apparatus, Xi Jinping's political authority has no doubt reached its zenith. With intra-party dominance and political consolidation, Jonghyuk LEE and Anthony TOH argue that Xi now has less incentive to forcefully invade Taiwan to restore his legitimacy. The cross-strait relations will likely experience a momentary lull

unless Xi encounters domestic challenges that could jeopardise his political standing in the party.

COMMENTARY

The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) was a [big win](#) for Xi Jinping. Not only did Xi secure his position as party chief for the third time, but there were also [major constitutional amendments](#) that further sealed Xi's political power. Moreover, all of Xi's political rivals were [excluded](#) from the top echelon of the party.

This paves the way for Xi to implement policies as he wishes without checks and balances. What all these symbolises is that Xi's political authority is at its peak, which could have severe ramifications for cross-strait relations. Ironically, with a firm grasp on the CPC leadership, Xi has less incentive to launch a non-peaceful attack on Taiwan. If Xi had failed to dominate the top brass of the party and compromises with cadres from opposing factions, he would recklessly and forcefully advance troops to the island to compensate for the lack of legitimacy in internal politics.

Xi's Robust Political Stability and China's Modus Operandi for Taiwan Reunification

With Xi fully consolidating his power in the CPC leadership, the chances that Xi's determinations can be altered become significantly low. Disgruntled party elders due to Xi's personalisation of power can no longer exert influence on the party's high-ranking selections through their extensive client-patron networks. There is unlikely any foreseeable instability stemming from within the party itself that is of great menace to Xi's political authority. Experts and pundits quickly assert that the country's domestic challenges are the only threats to Xi's long-term survival. They believe that [China's unsustainable zero-COVID strategy](#) and the [consequential economic downturn](#) will endanger Xi's legitimacy as people's daily lives are disrupted, while businesses, infrastructure, investments, and real estate are heavily [squeezed](#).

However, the impact must not be overstated. China's economic situation has not worsened to a fully-fledged economic recession. Based on [present evidence](#), Xi does not seem to face extreme domestic pressure in his fight against the pandemic. Such is of little surprise given that any failure arising from his zero-COVID strategy will automatically be deflected to [the inefficiencies of local-level officials](#) in appropriately carrying out Xi's instructions. This makes it hard for the general public to discern and react to the counterproductivity of Xi's zero-COVID strategy that the media often [portrays](#). The New York Times [reported](#) that the majority of Chinese people seem to tolerate lockdowns, mass testing, and quarantines, and there are no signs of diminishing public confidence in Xi's zero-COVID policies.

More importantly, public sentiment has limited influence on Xi's strategic considerations for his political survival. Xi's legitimacy to rule the country is based not on public support through a popular vote but on an ultimate consensus from CPC members whose cooperation is critical to run a massive country like China. Xi essentially relies on the party's overall legitimacy, which has been accumulated through many historic achievements, such as economic development. Public

grievance matters only when Xi's political rivals in the party strategically use the public account to keep him in check. This is one of the main mechanisms in how the CPC collective leadership can deter a one-man dictatorship. However, Xi completely dismantled the very system that ensures the party's accountability. As Xi successfully filled the top brass with his own confidants and followers, he simply blocked the way for others to initiate collective defiance against him.

By virtue of these, by no means is Xi embroiled in an actual legitimacy crisis. Thus, he bears no desperation to capitalise on extremely costly measures, notably the forceful reunification of Taiwan. With [Washington's](#) and [Tokyo's](#) resolutions to support Taiwan in a potential contingency, Xi's odds of winning are uncertain even if China's military power far outweighs Taiwan. Hence, the Chinese idiom “*zitaokuchi*”, which essentially means asking for unwanted trouble, is reflective of Xi's current situation. Why would Xi attack Taiwan when he is acutely aware that [the option of invading](#) Taiwan can easily go awry in all sorts of unimaginable ways? As such, Xi's political dominance is likely to have a calming effect. At least for now, China under Xi's rule prefers peaceful measures arising from economic and cultural soft power advantages to co-opt and reunify Taiwan as opposed to launching a sudden invasion of Taiwan.



Magong City, Penghu County. The islands of Penghu County sit astride the Taiwan Straits. [Photo](#) by *Johnson Hung on Unsplash*.

Balancing Between the Hard and the Soft: ‘Smart’ Reunification Strategy

In his [speech](#) at the 20th party congress, Xi mentioned prioritising peaceful reunification. However, his declaration came with a major [caveat](#). Xi made it clear that China will never renounce force [for Taiwan reunification](#). It is important to understand that Xi is not the first leader to be pushed into such a situation. [Xi's predecessors](#) also

focused on peaceful reunification without the renunciation of force. Jiang Zemin stated [his preference](#) for peaceful reunification through the “one country, two systems” framework. However, it was also during Jiang’s leadership that Chen Shui-bian won the election and subsequently moved Taiwan to independence. This effectively [forced](#) Jiang to declare that the use of force is still on the table if Taiwan under Chen’s tutelage declares independence. A [similar narrative](#) emerges during Hu Jintao’s reign. To avoid being soft on Taiwan, Hu enacted the [anti-secession law](#) in 2005, which justified the use of force if Taiwanese cross “redlines”.

Learning from the experiences of his predecessors, it is not surprising that Xi pursues similar strategies for peaceful reunification while keeping the option of force open, given that Xi has no appetite for allowing a much [more defiant Taiwan](#) under Tsai’s leadership to erode robustness of his political omnipotence. Narrow reliance on hard or soft power resources alone is hardly adequate to achieve foreign policy goals. Instead, the [smart strategy](#), which refers to the careful mix of hard and soft power resources, is often the most effective. From Xi’s angle, his explicit commitment to use force whenever necessary and simultaneous assertion of peaceful measures might help subdue Taiwan's confidence and then compel Taiwan to perceive that peaceful reunification is the best course for them, too.

Taiwan a Whipping Boy for Xi

China under Xi’s watch is unlikely to launch a hasty attack on Taiwan because Xi’s political stance is stable enough. However, can Taiwan afford to take this seemingly peaceful façade for granted? Clearly not. Perhaps, the biggest determinant of Taiwan’s safety is the degree of domestic challenges Xi faces. Domestic challenges, such as economic recession, can possibly spiral out of hand into a severe recession that spurs violent unrest. Likewise, it may be possible that new domestic challenges arise, and Xi fails to deal with them. Under such conditions, Xi will be forced to take radical measures to extricate himself from a legitimacy crisis. In this case, invading Taiwan will certainly be ideal to restore Xi’s legitimacy. Then, Taiwan must take its defense seriously to avoid being a victim of Xi’s incompetence.

Anthony Toh Han Yang is a Master of Science (International Relations) candidate and Jonghyuk Lee is an Assistant Professor in the China Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU).