

Xi Jinping's Taiwan Policy in the New Era (Su Chi)

In May 2005, Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as President of Russia. He proclaimed proudly, "Give me 20 years and I will give you a strong Russia." This is Putin's Russia Dream.

In the recently concluded 19th Party Congress, President Xi Jinping of China spent more than three hours, delivering a 32,000-word Political Report which included nothing as straight-forward as Putin's proclamation. But the same connotation (except the time-frame) was glaringly clear. Obviously for China a Xi Jinping era has begun. His Taiwan policy may be inferred from his unique background and this Report.

Xi hails from an entirely different background from his predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. He belongs to the so-called "Red II Generation." However, his father was purged early in Xi's childhood. Only 16 years old, he was sent to work for more than six years in a very poor village in the backward Shaanxi Province. His applications to join the Communist Party were rejected several times. Thanks to the strong recommendation of the village farmers, he was allowed to enroll in the Tsinghua University. After graduation he worked for some years as a secretary to the Defense Minister. What was most unusual, setting him apart from other "Red II Generation" peers, was that he chose to go back to work in a poor county in the Hebei Province, instead of staying in the more comfortable Beijing and working in the Government or Party, or making big money in one of the state-owned companies. After Hebei, he went to the poorer Fujian Province and stayed for 17 long years. Then he was transferred to lead the more prosperous Zhejiang Province and Shanghai City and straight up to the top leadership. This is the profile of a person who seems to be driven by a strong sense of mission, well-disciplined and thoroughly hardened by the vicissitudes of life. His 22-year experiences in provinces across the Taiwan Strait render him practically the only leader who best understands Taiwan. At the same time, this makes him politically most vulnerable on the intractable Taiwan problem.

Compared with the Political Reports of earlier Party Congresses, the 19th Report stands out in three respects. First, it is "more Chinese." When Xi

mentioned the term “New Era,” he meant not so much the pale and abstract “socialism,” as the “national rejuvenation” he had promulgated for five years since assuming the top leadership role. This 8-character Chinese term appeared 27 times in the Report, a sharp rise from the 5 times of two earlier Reports. His intention to appeal to the deep sentiments and aspirations of the Chinese people is unmistakably clear.

Second, it is “more Communist.” China is a vast country with huge population. And the people often harbor widely different views and aspirations among themselves. To move such a nation toward the same goal of “national rejuvenation,” the unwavering leadership of the Chinese Communist Party with its 80-million strong membership is absolutely essential. Hence Xi endows the Party, in this Report, with enormous power to lead the country in its political life, national defense, ideology, and economy, etc. Simultaneously he imposes on the Party stringent and wide-ranging restrictions in order to convince the people of the necessity and legitimacy of communist leadership.

Third, it is “more forward-looking.” Unprecedentedly, Xi described for his audience three stages ahead. By the year 2020, the country should have built “an overall well-to-do society.” By 2035, “comprehensive modernization” should be achieved. And finally by “mid-century,” the goal of “a rich, civilized, harmonious, beautiful and strong country” should be attained. His enumeration of the things to do to reach these goals reads like a detailed roadmap.

Against this personal and political background, how would Xi Jinping likely view the cross-strait relations? Compared with the Report of the 17th Party Congress, i.e., 10 years ago when President Chen Shui-bian was in power in Taiwan, the 19th Report deleted three of its crucial sentences, “We will strive toward peaceful reunification with greatest sincerity and utmost effort;” “We understand, trust, and care about our Taiwan compatriots;” and most symbolically, “We place our hopes on the people of Taiwan.” Compared with the Report of the 18th Party Congress of 2012 when President Ma Ying-jeou governed Taiwan, the 19th Report deleted the entire paragraph on “promoting negotiations.” Likewise, the sentence, “peaceful reunification best serves the fundamental interest of the entire Chinese people, including Taiwan’s compatriots,” disappeared

out of sight. The term “peaceful reunification” appeared five times in the 17th and 18th Congresses each, but only twice in the 19th. Clearly the weight of “peaceful reunification” and the importance of the “hearts and minds of Taiwan people” are reduced in Beijing’s policy toward Taiwan in Xi’s “New Era.”

Most revealing perhaps is the number of applauses given by the over 2,000 Party delegates to Xi’s Report. Altogether, the delegates applauded his lengthy speech 70 times. Seven punctuated the short 4-paragraph 600-word section on Taiwan. Other sections and issues received a round of applause only after a prolonged delivery. Yet, on Taiwan, in the hard-line paragraph, Xi was applauded at the end of each and every one of its four sentences. The longest applause, lasting 17 seconds, was given to the well-known “Six Anys”: “We will never allow anyone, any organization, any political party at any time or in any form separate any part of Chinese territory from China.” This seems to be the new public opinion on Taiwan. And it will surely constrain the “Taiwan hand” Xi Jinping severely.

How would a “more Chinese” China view the more alienated and independence-prone Taiwan? How would a “more Communist” China which has already tightened its internal control as well as its grip on Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet treat a separatist Taiwan that continues to cold-shoulder Beijing? Will Xi Jinping choose to live with the current cross-strait stalemate well beyond 2020, the year of Taiwan’s next presidential election, and face the music of the new public opinion of China when he is to host the First Centennial in 2021, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Party’s birth? If not, what would he do?

For Taiwan, these are big questions. Mr. David Helvey, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense of the USG, warned publicly two weeks ago in no uncertain terms that, “The reality is that Taiwan faces an existential threat.” One wonders how President Tsai Ing-wen’s administration will cope with this new situation.

(This is a translated version of the op-ed by Dr. Su Chi on *United Daily News*, October 29, 2017, p. 12. Dr. Su is Chairman of Taipei Forum, and former Secretary General of ROCG’s National Security Council)