

**REFRAMING THE STRAIT: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS
OF THE CCP'S TAIWAN POLICY ACROSS THE PARTY
CONGRESSES (1992-2022)**

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Intro

As Odd Arne Westad has observed¹, China's foreign policy must be understood as the product of its modern metamorphosis—shaped by both domestic and foreign influences, and by the interplay of internal and external pressures to a much greater extent than in most other countries. In this spirit, this paper offers a diachronic analysis of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) evolving discourse on Taiwan, focusing on the six most recent Party Congresses, from the 14th (1992) to the 20th (2022). By examining the official rhetoric articulated in these pivotal political moments, the study seeks to trace the semantic, ideological, and strategic transformations in the CCP's approach to the Taiwan question. The Party Congresses represent crucial junctures through which Beijing has codified its priorities and recalibrated its political vocabulary, making them valuable sites for analyzing the shifting contours of its Taiwan policy.

From the early 1990s to the early 2010s, the CCP's discourse was characterized by strategic patience and rhetorical flexibility: while firmly upholding the "One China Principle", Beijing displayed a cautious openness to political engagement with Taipei, interpreting developments on the island through the lens of potential convergence. In this

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¹ O. A. WESTAD, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750*, London, The Bodley Head, 2012, p. 2.

phase, Taiwan was often framed as an interlocutor—albeit within clear ideological constraints—whose internal evolution might, over time, produce conditions conducive to peaceful reunification. However, more recent developments, especially those culminating in the 20th Party Congress, reveal a qualitative shift in both tone and strategic posture. The CCP appears to have moved from observation to intervention—from a position of measured expectation with respect to political change within Taiwan to an increasingly coercive approach in which dialogue is supplanted by deterrence. This transition reflects a fundamental loss of faith in the possibility of a politically negotiated path to reunification. Instead, Taiwan is now primarily framed as a site of foreign interference and as a critical fault line in the broader geopolitical rivalry between Beijing and Washington. The abandonment of earlier discursive openings toward Taipei's institutions and civil society is paralleled by the elevation of the Taiwan issue as a central—if not the central—dimension of China's strategic contest with the United States. By exploring this discursive trajectory, the paper argues that the Taiwan question has not only been resemanticized within the CCP's ideological vocabulary but also structurally repositioned within China's grand strategy. The language of peaceful cooperation has been gradually displaced by that of national security, historical inevitability, and external containment—marking a turning point in cross-Straits relations and in the PRC's approach to regional order. Methodologically, this contribution draws on official CCP documents and speeches as primary sources, placing them within the broader analytical framework of international history and the historiography of PRC foreign relations.

1. *From the 14th to the 15th Congress: substantial continuity and conciliatory tones*

During the 14th Congress of the CCP, held in October 1992, the Taiwan issue was addressed in line with the principles laid out in Deng Xiaoping's strategic vision. The historical context was particularly significant: the «one country, two systems» formula—initially conceived as a framework for the peaceful reunification with Taiwan—was instead first implemented in the cases of Hong Kong and Macau, which would return to Chinese sovereignty as Special Administrative Regions

in 1997 and 1999, respectively. More specifically, a policy of reunification was formally announced by Ye Jianyin in 1979, stating that Taiwan would become a Special Administrative Region of China, and that the political, economic and cultural characteristics would not be changed². Notably, the tone adopted during the Congress appeared to signal a certain openness to engaging not only with Taiwan's institutional structures but also with the evolving societal landscape emerging from the island's internal transformation. On December 19, 1992, Taiwan held what was arguably the most democratic election in the history of any Chinese society. The domestic political environment was undergoing a profound reconfiguration, and future developments remained highly uncertain and difficult to anticipate. The speech delivered by Jiang Zemin, the General Secretary of the CCP since 1989, was characterized by rather conciliatory tones regarding Taiwan, mentioning contacts with KMT representatives and the ending of the state of hostility across the Strait; as stated by Jiang: "Assuming the premise that there is only one China, we are prepared to talk with the Taiwan authorities about any matter, including what form official negotiations should take, in order to find an accommodation that is acceptable to both sides"³.

In his speech of 30 January 1995, in which he articulated the so-called "Eight-Point Proposal", Jiang Zemin reaffirmed and further developed several key elements that had already been introduced during the 14th Congress of the Communist Party of China. Given the fact that "[t]here are only two ways to resolve the Taiwan question: by peaceful means and by non-peaceful means"⁴, Jiang openly stated that "[w]e have steadfastly advocated achieving reunification by peaceful means through negotiations"⁵ and further stressed that "Chinese peo-

² C. L. CHIOU, *Dilemmas in China's Reunification Policy toward Taiwan*, in "Asian Survey", n. 4, 1986, p. 469.

³ Z. JIANG, *Accelerate reform, opening up and modernization and achieve greater success in building socialism with chinese characteristics*, in EDITORIAL COMMITTEE FOR PARTY LITERATURE, CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA (ed.) "Selected works of Jiang Zemin", Vol. 1, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2010, p. 243

⁴ Z. JIANG, *Continue to promote the reunification of the motherland*, in Editorial Committee for Party Literature, Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (ed.) "Selected works of Jiang Zemin", Vol. 1, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2010, p. 408.

⁵ Z. JIANG, *Continue to promote the reunification of the motherland*, cit., p. 408.

ple should not fight each other”⁶. More notably, in a subsequent passage, he stressed that Taiwan’s social and economic systems would not be subjected to change after reunification, and that there would not be troops stationed in Taiwan. While the speech delivered at the 15th Party Congress in 1997 did not significantly diverge from those of 1992 and 1995, it nonetheless reflected, to some extent, the impact of the recently concluded Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, which culminated in live-fire training exercises by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Washington responded with naval deployments, including the transit of two carrier groups. As Taiwan approached its first direct presidential election in early 1996, the PLA escalated pressure with further missile launches and large-scale drills, while the US presence served as a clear deterrent⁷. These military maneuvers unfolded within a broader context of profound political transformation on the island. The first years of Lee Teng-hui’s presidency (1994–1996) had significantly altered the tone and substance of cross-Strait relations. As the first native-born president of the Republic of China, Lee played a crucial role in fostering a growing sense of Taiwanese self-identification, which was increasingly articulated in political, cultural, and diplomatic terms. His administration embraced a more assertive approach in defending Taiwan’s autonomy and international visibility, openly challenging the foundational tenets of the “One China principle”. Notably, Lee advocated for Taiwan’s inclusion in international organizations, including the United Nations—positions that further strained relations with Beijing. Although Jiang Zemin’s 1997 speech reaffirmed the centrality of peaceful reunification and reiterated the “Eight-Point Proposal” introduced in 1995, it also reflected heightened concerns over both internal and external threats to the reunification agenda. Greater emphasis was placed on the so-called secessionist tendencies, along with the role of foreign forces in obstructing national unification. Yet, despite this sharper tone, the political discourse on Taiwan articulated by Jiang between 1992 and 1997 reveals a marked degree of continuity, rooted in the strategic vision laid out under Deng Xiaoping.

⁶ Z. JIANG, *Continue to promote the reunification of the motherland*, cit., p. 408.

⁷ L. SHENG, *China’s Dilemma – The Taiwan Issue*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001, p. 27.

2. *Strategic Continuity and Discursive Prudence in the 16th Congress*

Held in November 2002, the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party marked a moment of leadership transition rather than doctrinal transformation in the Party's approach to Taiwan. As a matter of fact, some scholars argue that starting from the late '90, Jiang's policy toward Taiwan, was indeed characterized by a certain "impatience", as suggested by some of the contents presented in the Taiwan White Paper published in February 2000. As said, while the contents of Jiang's speech mark a substantial continuity with the past might be framed as a sign of partial change⁸. In addition, Chinese scholars argue that Jiang's report on Taiwan policy articulated five "no changes", accompanied by a set of new ideas pertaining to Taiwan; among these, the advancement of a new definition of the "One China Principle" further restricted Taiwan's international space⁹. In any case, despite these fluctuations, since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis the strategic landscape had remained largely unchanged: political tensions persisted, yet cross-Strait economic and societal linkages had intensified. Within this context, the Congress reaffirmed Beijing's long-established dual-track strategy—peaceful reunification under the "one country, two systems" framework, paired with a continued threat of military force in the event of a Taiwanese declaration of independence. Although no substantive shift in Taiwan policy emerged from the Congress, the official discourse was characterized by rhetorical moderation and strategic ambiguity, which predominated the Party's statements on the Taiwan issue.

Hu's first public intervention on Taiwan, during the 10th National People's Congress in March 2003, reflected this carefully managed continuity. Stressing the "One China principle" enhanced "economic and cultural exchanges", and the importance of "confidence in Taiwan compatriots", he also invoked the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". These remarks were cautious, devoid of innovation, and tailored to avoid provocation—consistent with an overarching strategy of

⁸ C. CHEN, *Comparing Jiang Zemin's Impatience with Hu Jintao's Patience Regarding the Taiwan Issue, 1989-2012*, in "Journal of Contemporary China", n. 78, 2012, p. 957.

⁹ C. TUNG, *An Assessment of China's Taiwan Policy under the Third Generation Leadership*, in "Asia Survey", n. 3, 2005, p. 348.

strategic patience. At the 16th Congress, Beijing's approach seemed more responsive to political shifts in Taiwan than to internal CCP dynamics, with cross-Strait relations largely shaped by developments on the island. In particular, the PRC leadership maintained a close watch on the trajectory of President Chen Shui-bian, whose administration had shown limited internal cohesion and relied increasingly on the mobilization of ethnic identity to consolidate power. Moreover, Beijing perceived with concern Chen's instrumentalization of the divide between *waishengren* and *benshengren*¹⁰, interpreting it as both a source of domestic polarization and a challenge to national unity narratives. The 16th Party Congress reaffirmed China's ideological and strategic consistency on Taiwan, combining rhetorical caution with institutional continuity. Beijing viewed Taiwan's internal political shifts—especially under President Chen Shui-bian—as the main challenge to the status quo. Confronted with legislative opposition, Chen embraced an identity-based politics that distanced Taiwan from its Chinese roots, marking a turning point in increasingly divergent cross-Strait trajectories.

3. 17th Congress: Pragmatic Openings and Rhetorical Moderation

Held in October 2007, the 17th Party Congress reflected a shifting cross-Strait landscape, increasingly open to cooperation—initially economic, with possible political implications. Unlike the defensive posture of the 16th Congress under Chen Shui-bian's assertive identity politics, this Congress unfolded amid a thaw in relations, encouraged by prospects for dialogue as KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou gained ground ahead of the 2008 election. Ma's electoral platform was strongly centered on the imperative of renewed dialogue with Beijing and a progressively deeper economic synergy with China.

On the other side of the Strait, numerous signals from the Chinese leadership suggested a diplomatic thaw, indicating an openness to a recalibration of cross-Strait relations. A particularly notable shift was evident in the public discourse of the Chinese Communist Party, which

¹⁰ L. LAMS, X. L. LIAO, *Tracing "Taiwanization" Processes in Taiwanese Presidential Statements in Times of Cross-Strait Rapprochement*, in "Journal of Current Chinese Affairs", n. 1, 2011.

adopted an unprecedentedly moderate tone on Taiwan, emphasizing dialogue and economic cooperation over confrontation. During this period, former CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin's prior statements were revisited, including his notable rhetorical shift away from force and toward a more flexible interpretation of the One China Principle. Hu Jintao refrained from referencing the use of force and, in a significant rhetorical shift, articulated a different interpretation of the One China Principle which, as reported by Chang and Chien, would be substituted by the term "'92 consensus"¹¹. Moving beyond the previous emphasis¹² on the necessity of acknowledging the principle of One China (*chen-gren yi ge zhongguo de yuanze*) Hu signaled a willingness to engage in dialogue with Taipei, "We are ready to conduct exchanges, dialogue, consultations and negotiations with any political party in Taiwan on any issue as long as it recognizes that both sides of the Straits belong to one and the same China"¹³. Furthermore, Hu's Congress Report notably omitted any reference to the failed referendum initiated by Chen Shui-bian, which had sought Taiwan's accession to the United Nations¹⁴. The intention to establish a direct channel of communication with Taipei's incoming administration—one that would replace President Chen, viewed as a highly antagonistic figure in Beijing—was evident. At the same time, however, the CCP sought to avoid alienating political factions in Taiwan that were resistant to engagement with the PRC. In the months leading up to Ma Ying-jeou's election, economic cooperation across the Strait was increasingly perceived as a viable precursor to a broader political dialogue¹⁵. Both Beijing and the international community regarded this prospect as a tangible pathway for cross-Strait engagement.

¹¹ W. CHANG, C. CHAO, *Managing Stability in the Taiwan Strait: Non-Military Policy towards Taiwan under Hu Jintao*, in "Journal of Current Chinese Affairs", n. 3, 2009.

¹² Y. DING, *Cross-Strait Peace Agreement: Diminishing Likelihood*, in "Asian Affairs", n. 1, 2012.

¹³ Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 17th Party Congress, 15 October 2007, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2010-09/07/content_29578561.htm.

¹⁴ W. CHAI, *Taiwan's 2008 Elections and Their Impact on U.S.-China-Taiwan Relations*, in "Asian Affairs", n. 2, 2008; J. T. DREYER, *U.S.-Taiwan Relations and the Referendum Issue*, in "American Journal of Chinese Studies", Special Issue, 2009.

¹⁵ G. LIN, *Beijing's New Strategies toward a Changing Taiwan*, in "Journal of Contemporary China", n. 99, 2016.

4. *Changing narratives in the 18th Congress: from Peaceful Reunification to Peaceful Growth*

Building on the cautious optimism and pragmatic engagement that had followed the 17th Party Congress and Ma Ying-jeou's election, the 18th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party—held in November 2012—unfolded in a context shaped by Beijing's growing expectation of an increasingly collaborative dynamic across the Taiwan Strait¹⁶. In contrast to previous periods marked by confrontation and strategic diffidence, the years leading up to the Congress had seen a notable consolidation of economic and institutional exchanges, underpinned by a shared—if asymmetric—interest in stabilizing bilateral ties. Under the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou, the Republic of China had embraced a more conciliatory approach, with both sides signaling, at least in principle, a willingness to explore a synthesis capable of reconciling their enduring historical and political divergences. Hu Jintao placed even greater emphasis on the progress made in cross-Strait cooperation under Ma's presidency, stressing the establishment of the so called Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA)¹⁷. In line with this, he noted that: "We have achieved a major transition in the relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Straits, with direct and two-way links of mail service, transport and trade fully established, and the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement between them has been signed for implementation"¹⁸. This statement underscores Beijing's effort to frame Ma's tenure as a period of unprecedented stability and engagement, reinforcing its broader narrative that closer economic and institutional ties were essential for fostering long-term reconciliation. While primarily directed at a domestic audience in mainland

¹⁶ J. DELISLE, *Soft Power in a Hard Place: China, Taiwan, Cross-Strait Relations and U.S. Policy*, in "Orbis", n. 4, 2010.

¹⁷ P. L. HSIEH, *The China-Taiwan ECFA, Geopolitical Dimensions and WTO Law*, in "Journal of International Economic Law", n. 1, 2011; S. L. KASTNER, *Does Economic Integration Across the Taiwan Strait Make Military Conflict Less Likely?*, in "Journal of East Asian Studies", n. 3, 2006, pp. 319-320; D. H. ROSEN, Z. WANG, *Deepening China-Taiwan Relations through the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement*, Washington, D.C., Peterson Institute for International Economy, 2010.

¹⁸ Full text of Hu's report at 18th Party Congress, 8 November 2012, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2012-11/18/content_29578562.htm.

China, this message also functioned as a calculated signal to the Taiwanese public, marking the debut of the phrase “peaceful growth of cross-Strait relations” in official party rhetoric.

The concept of “peaceful growth” (*heping fazhan*) reflected a significant discursive shift in the CCP approach to the Taiwan issue. By replacing more rigid formulations such as “peaceful reunification” with language that emphasized a process-oriented, developmental logic, the CCP sought to recast the trajectory of cross-Strait relations in more gradualist and ostensibly benign terms. This reframing was further reinforced by Hu Jintao’s explicit assertion: “To achieve peaceful reunification, we must, above everything else, ensure peaceful growth of relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Straits”¹⁹. The formulation positioned “peaceful growth” not merely as a diplomatic slogan, but as a necessary precondition for the eventual realization of unification, anchoring the Party’s legitimacy claims regarding Taiwan policy in the steady expansion of economic, social, and institutional interdependence²⁰. The CCP aimed at presenting a strategic narrative that emphasized mutual benefit and stability, framing the Ma administration’s cooperative stance as a model of engagement. In doing so, it implicitly contrasted this with alternative political trajectories—such as those advocated by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The 18th Party Congress served to legitimize prior cross-Strait achievements and outlined terms for future engagement—a trajectory viewed by regional actors and the Western world, including the United States, as stabilizing for global strategic balance. At the same time, the Congress marked a pivotal moment in the leadership transition from the fourth-generation leadership under President Hu Jintao to the fifth-generation under Xi Jinping, who would formally assume the presidency in March 2013. Under Xi, the Taiwan issue acquired renewed strategic salience within the broader architecture of national rejuvenation and the safeguarding of what Beijing defines as its “core interests”. As several studies on the PRC’s foreign policy have pointed out²¹, the trend toward centralization

¹⁹ https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2012-11/18/content_29578562.htm.

²⁰ A. D. ROMBERG, *Following the 18th Party Congress: Moving Forward Step by Step*, in “China Leadership Monitor”, n. 40, Hoover Institution Stanford University, 2013, p. 2.

²¹ M. TAYLOR, J. GARLICK, *‘Flexible’ versus ‘Fragmented’ Authoritarianism: Evidence*

in foreign policy-making accelerated immediately after the inauguration of the Xi Jinping administration—an evolution widely interpreted as a response to the perceived shortcomings of the previous era, which had suffered from the adverse effects of decentralization and institutional fragmentation.

5. *Political Deadlock and Conditional Engagement in the 19th Congress*

Unlike the previous Party Congress, whose conciliatory and constructive rhetoric was underpinned by tangible progress in cross-Strait relations, the 19th National Congress of the CCP—held in Beijing in October 2017—occurred in a markedly different political context, characterized by growing estrangement and institutional deadlock between Taipei and Beijing; under Tsai Ing-wen’s presidency, official communications between Taipei and Beijing had largely ceased, with the CCP responding with strategic silence²². Despite this climate of tension, outreach efforts toward the Taiwanese population remained significant. The Congress also took place after Xi Jinping had completed his first full term as Party leader, a period during which he had already begun to consolidate authority across key areas of governance, including foreign policy. Within this broader context, Xi Jinping’s direct participation in the high-profile meeting with then-President of the Republic of China, Ma Ying-jeou, in Singapore on 7 November 2015 stands out as a particularly notable episode. The encounter—marking the first-ever meeting between the top leaders of both sides of the Strait—constituted an unprecedented act of personal political exposure for a President of the People’s Republic of China on the Taiwan issue.

In essence, China’s policy under Xi Jinping after the 19th Party Congress has been characterized by a dualist approach in which a soft

from Chinese Foreign Policy during the Xi Jinping Era, in “Australian Journal of International Affairs”, n. 2, 2024; S. WANG, *Xi Jinping’s Centralisation of Chinese Foreign Policy Decision-Making Power*, in “East Asian Policy”, n. 2, 2017; L. HAO, *Xi Jinping’s Dominance in China’s Foreign Policy*, in “East Asian Policy”, n. 3, 2022.

²² B. SCHREER, *The Double-Edged Sword of Coercion: Cross-Strait Relations After the 2016 Taiwan Elections*, in “Asian Politics & Policy”, n. 1, 2017.

power charm offensive has been the primary strategy to appeal to the Taiwanese public, whereas coercive measures in the diplomatic arena and military sphere have served as the supplementary approach to pressure the DPP government. Nonetheless, Xi Jinping's report to the 19th Party Congress reiterated a conditional openness to cross-Straits dialogue, albeit under strict political preconditions. His remarks underscored Beijing's continued emphasis on peaceful unification, while reiterating its firm stance on national sovereignty and territorial integrity: "Recognize the historical fact of the 1992 Consensus and that the two sides both belong to one China, and then our two sides can conduct dialogue to address through discussion the concerns of the people of both sides, and no political party or group in Taiwan will have any difficulty conducting exchanges with the mainland"²³.

Xi Jinping further emphasized the idea of a shared destiny between the people of both sides of the Strait: "Blood is thicker than water. People on both sides of the Taiwan Straits are brothers and sisters; we share the bond of kinship. Guided by the conviction that we are all of the same family, we respect the current social system and way of life in Taiwan and are ready to share the development opportunities on the mainland with our Taiwan compatriots first"²⁴. Despite this rhetorical openness, Chinese commentators noted a significant evolution in strategic posture. That same year, the CCP's discourse began shifting from a logic of "preventing independence" to one of "promoting unification" (*fangdu zhuanxiang chutong*). As highlighted in a December 2017 commentary by the *Global Times*, expressions such as "realizing the complete reunification of the motherland" and "the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation" were interpreted as signs that Beijing would increasingly pursue a proactive strategy aimed at shrinking the space for pro-independence forces in Taiwan and generating mounting pressure on their political viability²⁵.

²³ Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress, 18 October 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

²⁴ https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm.

²⁵ C. JIN, 'Wu tong Taiwan' jinggao de zhixiang xing hen qingxi, in "Huanqiu Shibao", 13 December 2017, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaRmK61pV>.

6. Coercive Assertiveness and Discursive Control in the 20th Congress

The 20th Congress of the CCP, held from October 16 to 22, 2022, took place against the backdrop of mounting geopolitical tensions, particularly in relation to cross-Strait dynamics. The months preceding the Congress saw heightened military activity following the visit of then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taipei in August 2022—an event that Beijing denounced as a direct provocation and a violation of the One China Principle. The PLA responded with large-scale military exercises, signaling the establishment of a “new normal” in the Taiwan Strait marked by increasingly regular displays of force, PLA naval crossings of the median line, and a recalibration of previous informal red lines in cross-Strait relations²⁶.

Internationally, these actions contributed to a renewed global focus on Taiwan’s strategic significance and security vulnerability within the broader framework of U.S.-China competition²⁷. Washington adopted a more explicit stance on Taiwan, aligning with its broader framing of rivalry with Beijing. In this increasingly adversarial context, the 20th Party Congress Report reaffirms China’s traditional Taiwan policy with greater rhetorical intensity. While the objective of reunification is consistent with previous official documents, it is now presented in more emphatic terms as “the most vital of all vital interests”²⁸. Taiwan is described unequivocally as an “inalienable part of China”, and the Taiwan issue is explicitly framed as an internal matter, thereby rejecting any form of external involvement. These assertions are integrated into a broader ideological vision in which national reunification is portrayed as essential for achieving the “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*). The CCP’s evolving strategic outlook is reflected in the Report’s formulation: “Taiwan is China’s Taiwan. Resolving the Taiwan question is a matter for the Chinese, a matter that

²⁶ A. INSISA, *Taiwan 2022: Cross-Strait security spirals further down*, in “Asia Maior”, vol. XXXIII, 2022; D. CAMPAGNOLA, *The status quo between Taiwan and China: The inevitability of a dramatic end?*, in “Taiwan Politics”, November, 2024.

²⁷ Q. ZHANG, *The 20th CPC National Congress and China’s Foreign Policy: implication and reflection*, in “China International Strategy Review”, vol. 5, 2023.

²⁸ S. PELAGGI, *Il più vitale degli interessi vitali: Taiwan nel XX Congresso e l’evoluzione storica delle relazioni tra Pechino e Taipei*, in “Orizzonte Cina”, n. 2-3, 2022.

must be resolved by the Chinese. We will continue to strive for peaceful reunification with the greatest sincerity and the utmost effort, but we will never promise to renounce the use of force, and we reserve the option of taking all measures necessary. [...] The wheels of history are rolling on toward China's reunification and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Complete reunification of our country must be realized, and it can, without doubt, be realized!"²⁹. The Report thus maintains a dual posture: while affirming the goal of peaceful reunification, it reinforces the legitimacy of using force if deemed necessary, particularly in response to foreign interference or pro-independence forces, underpinning a broader narrative of national security and sovereignty under threat. The rhetorical shift is also evident in the diminished attention to Taiwanese public opinion. While references to kinship and cultural affinity persist, the Report notably lacks any effort to appeal to Taiwanese civil society or to present reunification as a mutually beneficial process. However, it is notable that the data retrieved by some scholars in a nationwide survey in China, armed unification with the mainland garnered only a slim majority, accounting for 55%³⁰. Unlike in previous decades—when Beijing left open the possibility of engaging not only with Taiwanese authorities but also with broader segments of society and civil actors—the 20th Party Congress reflects a narrowing of that space. A partial exception is found in the reference to sharing development opportunities with “Taiwan compatriots,” a statement widely interpreted as a direct reference to the KMT, which continues to officially recognize the 1992 Consensus and remains a viable interlocutor for Beijing. Yet this form of engagement appears far more selective and instrumental than the broader societal overtures of previous decades, further underscoring the CCP's growing reliance on coercion over persuasion in its Taiwan strategy³¹.

²⁹ Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects, 16 October 2022, http://en.qstheory.cn/2023-01/06/c_845251.htm.

³⁰ A. Y. LIU, X. LI, *Assessing Public Support for (Non) Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China*, in “Journal of Contemporary China”, n. 145, 2024.

³¹ F. MADOKA, *The Xi Jinping Regime's Maneuvering against Taiwan: Characteristics and Prospects*, in “Asia-Pacific Review”, n. 2, 2022.

The emphasis on foreign adversaries suggests a perception of an increasingly hostile international environment³². This shift can be interpreted as part of a broader transformation in China's strategic thinking—from the earlier “period of strategic opportunity” (*zhanlue jiyu qi*), to the more recent “period of historical opportunities” (*lishi jiyu qi*)³³, a term repeatedly invoked by Xi Jinping to characterize a phase of proactive national development amid global uncertainty. The 20th Party Congress reflects not only a deepening pessimism regarding the prospects of peaceful accommodation, but also a clear shift in strategic orientation—from observation to intervention, from cautious openness to assertive pressure.

Conclusions

According to Allen M. Wachman, China's Taiwan policy has evolved through three main phases. From 1949 to 1979, Beijing pursued a “hard” strategy focused on military liberation. Between 1979 and 1993, it adopted a “soft” approach centered on peaceful reunification under the “one country, two systems” formula. Since 1993, China has combined both strategies, mixing inducements with coercive tools. From 2020 onward, however, a further and more decisive shift has taken place—one not limited to military assertiveness or economic pressure. The new phase, marked by the large-scale military exercises of August 2022 and the 20th Party Congress held shortly thereafter, signals the beginning of an era dominated by coercion and lacking any meaningful effort to engage with Taiwanese civil society. Whereas previous Party Congresses paired unification rhetoric with gestures of openness—occasionally portraying Taiwan's democratic development in a favorable light—recent years have seen the Chinese Communist Party shift toward a strategy centered on deterrence. This change, driven in part by the DPP's consolidation of power and promotion of a distinct Taiwanese identity, is reflected in intensified mil-

³² G. NATALIZIA, L. TERMINE, *Tracing the modes of China's revisionism in the Indo-Pacific: a comparison with pre-1941 Shōwa Japan*, in “Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica”, n. 1, 2021.

³³ http://en.qstheory.cn/2023-01/06/c_845251.htm.

itary activity, heightened diplomatic and economic pressure, and efforts to delegitimize Taiwan's political model. Deterrence now appears aimed not only at preventing formal independence, but also at curbing the broader affirmation of Taiwan's societal and political distinctiveness. This transformation reflects a narrowing of political imagination, in which the Taiwanese population is no longer viewed as an interlocutor, but rather as an obstacle—or instrument—in Beijing's pursuit of national reunification.

This discursive transformation represents a narrowing of political imagination in which the Taiwanese population is no longer seen as an active subject but rather as an obstacle or instrument in Beijing's pursuit of national reunification. The 20th Party Congress Report's coercive rhetoric reflects the CCP's growing skepticism toward Taiwan-led rapprochement. While reaffirming a preference for peaceful resolution, it avoids setting a timeline, consistent with past declarations that reserve force as a last resort.

Nonetheless, the 20th Party Congress signals a qualitative transformation in Beijing's overall posture. In past decades, the CCP's position—although firmly committed to the principle of reunification—had included a degree of flexibility in tone and approach, at times suggesting a readiness to accommodate or respond to political shifts within Taiwan. This strategic patience was reflected in Beijing's attentiveness to the island's evolving internal dynamics, including fluctuating electoral cycles and shifting public sentiment. Moreover, previous messaging had left open the possibility of engaging not only with Taiwanese authorities, but also with broader segments of society and civil actors, in the hope that increased integration or mutual understanding could lay the groundwork for future cooperation. The 20th Party Congress reflects not only a deepening pessimism regarding the prospects of peaceful accommodation, but also a clear shift in strategic orientation from cautious openness to assertive pressure. Beijing now prioritizes deterrence over dialogue, replacing hopes of reconciliation with a strategy of resolve and rhetorical control. The 20th Party Congress may thus be interpreted as a pivotal juncture in which Beijing moves to consolidate a more hardline approach—narrowing the space for mutual accommodation and redefining cross-Straits relations along increasingly confrontational lines.

Riassunto - L'articolo propone un'analisi diacronica del discorso del Partito Comunista Cinese su Taiwan attraverso i Congressi del Partito dal 1992 al 2022, intesi come momenti chiave per comprendere l'evoluzione ideologica e strategica della politica estera cinese. Inserendosi nella tradizione della storia delle relazioni internazionali, lo studio mostra come il linguaggio del PCC abbia progressivamente ridefinito Taiwan: da interlocutore potenziale a strumento o ostacolo alla

realizzazione della “grande rinascita della nazione cinese”. La narrazione ufficiale ha progressivamente escluso la società civile dell'isola dal quadro politico, mentre la questione taiwanese appare come la principale linea di frattura nella competizione con gli Stati Uniti. Il lessico della cooperazione è stato sostituito da quello della sicurezza e della deterrenza, segnando un passaggio da un'attesa strategica a una postura assertiva e centralizzata.