

China's Communist party congress

Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping steers towards confrontation with west in 'great rejuvenation' push

Paramount leader's consolidation of power heightens risks as tensions escalate over Taiwan and war in Ukraine

Edward White in Seoul YESTERDAY

China's president Xi Jinping has signalled his intention to steer the foreign policy of the world's most populous country and rising military superpower away from reconciliation with the west as he warned of "grave international developments" not seen in the past 100 years.

In a nearly two-hour speech opening the Chinese Communist party's 20th national congress in Beijing on Sunday, Xi [touted his administration's success](#) in countering foreign interference and safeguarding China's "dignity" and "core interests".

Xi also issued thinly veiled criticism of the US and its allies, boasting that China under his leadership had taken a "clear-cut stance" against hegemonism and stood unwavering in the face of "bullying". China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong reiterated his [commitment to taking control of Taiwan](#), potentially by military force.

But he also warned the party's leadership gathered in the Great Hall of the People to "be ready to withstand high winds, choppy waters and even dangerous storms".

His remarks came as ties between [China](#) and the west have sunk to historic lows. Experts on both sides see scant possibility of an improvement under Xi, who will cement his leadership beyond the two five-year terms of his predecessors at the party congress this week.

"The Chinese leadership has convinced itself that the west won't voluntarily accept China's rise unless China demonstrates formidable power," said Zhao Tong of Tsinghua University in Beijing.

On Sunday, [Xi](#) emphasised that China's military had been significantly strengthened under his watch and promised that the nation's rejuvenation was on an "irreversible" course.

"There was a defensiveness to Xi's message, insisting that 'security' comes first and that only the party can keep the nation and people safe . . . with himself at the helm," said John Delury, an expert on Chinese politics at Yonsei University in Seoul.

Analysts said Xi, who took power in 2012, has decisively abandoned decades of caution in Beijing's foreign relations as he seeks to fulfil his vision for China's "great rejuvenation" as a superpower.

Ryan Hass, a former White House National Security Council director for China and Taiwan, said Beijing seemed to have resolved on compelling other countries to accept China's conduct and ambitions, rather than "placate external anxieties" about its amassing strength.

"Whereas former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping preached patience, Xi is a study in impatience," Hass, now with the Brookings Institution, wrote in a recent essay. "China's leaders seem to want to put the world on notice that they are prepared to confront any country that dares stand in their path of 'national rejuvenation'."

In response to fears of China's increasing military and economic sway, the US and its allies are formalising multilateral economic and security groups and restricting China's access to leading technologies. Western capitals have also become increasingly outspoken about Beijing's crackdowns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong and the People's Liberation Army's assertiveness in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.

Wang Jisi, a top Beijing foreign policy expert, characterised US-China ties over the past 10 years as a "tortuous road" from engagement to competition. As frictions deepened, China's leaders "developed a clearer realisation" that the difficulties were deep-rooted not only in areas of direct competition but were also embedded in the countries' respective political structures.

"Consequently, as long as China insists on 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' — or what some Americans call 'state capitalism' — and refuses to make fundamental political changes, it must be prepared to engage in a long-term strategic competition with the United States," Wang said in a recent lecture.

Rather than try to address frayed relations with the west, analysts said Xi's diplomats and Chinese companies were likely to be directed to expand influence over governments seen as less closely aligned with the US and Europe. Yet Xi's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine or employ his significant leverage to lobby President Vladimir Putin to end the war threatens to undermine Beijing's standing with non-western countries.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February, Beijing has echoed the Kremlin's insistence that US-led Nato "encroachment" in Europe was the real trigger for the conflict.

Over recent weeks, Xi has come under renewed pressure to step back from his decade-long partnership with Putin amid rising global fears that Russia might be

preparing to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

One international relations expert based in Shanghai who asked not to be named said China felt “more secure” as it expanded its influence over other countries. However, the expert said there were areas in which China’s position could be improved, including “Russia and the handling of the Ukraine war”.

Others believed Xi will not abandon his close friendship and [“no limits partnership” with Putin](#) — the pair have met in person 39 times in the past decade — despite the Russian leader’s nuclear threats clashing with China’s own self-interest.

“If Russia is not stopped, China will blame it on the west and Ukraine pushing Russia into a corner, with an alluded message that no one should push China on Taiwan, ever,” said Yun Sun, director of the China programme at the Stimson Center think-tank in Washington.

As Xi embarks on an unprecedented third term as China’s leader, his consolidation of power also means he is increasingly surrounded by people afraid to give him bad news, stifling any calls for course-correction as Beijing’s relations with the west worsen, analysts warned.

Wang, the Beijing academic, said China’s “official line has encouraged nationalistic sentiments and triumphalism . . . and discouraged people from voicing modest views. Those Chinese who are openly critical of such a diplomatic style run the risk of being attacked as ‘traitors’.”

Additional reporting by Maiqi Ding in Beijing

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