

CHINA'S *MANTRA* FOR GREAT MARITIME POWERHOOD: PRESIDENT XI'S SPEECH AT 20TH NPC SETS THE AGENDA

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Abstract

The 'work report' speech of the Chinese President in the 20th National Party Congress (NPC) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) had domestic orientation covering various themes related to the governance of the nation and the indispensable role that Party's had to play therein. Even though maritime security and the measures required to achieve it did find fleeting mention, the same were somehow missed by the China watchers and maritime analysts. This article highlights these vital issues related to the Chinese endeavours to 'strengthen the safeguards for ensuring maritime security', 'strengthen its capacity to ensure overseas security', 'safeguard China's maritime rights and interests', 'resolutely defend the Country's sovereignty, security, and development interests'. All these imperatives indicate stepped-up efforts to build China into 'a strong maritime country', under a 'means' and 'end' matrix. It is also argued that once a coercive military capability is built up by China, then it can be used in any form, and at any time, in support of its national interests. The US is naturally concerned by these developments; and so should India be too.

Keywords: 13th Five Year Plan, 20 NPC, China Coast Guard, Marine Economy, Maritime Rights and Interests, Overseas interests, PLA Navy, SLOC, Xi Jinping, Work Report

The 20th National Party Congress (NPC) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) commenced on 16 October 2022. The opening item of the agenda was the presentation of the work report on behalf of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC in the form of a speech by the Party General Secretary — and the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) — Xi Jinping. The speech, as expected, presented the achievements of CPC in last five years in a positive light, and along predictable lines. The crux however, lay in the articulation of an envisioned road map for the CPC to steer the nation towards achieving the "... *second centenary goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects, and to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization.*"¹(sic) The Presidential speech spanned 15 themes covering a broad spectrum of inter-connected strands. Table 1 lists all these themes.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 25 October 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html

<u>Section</u>	<u>Theme</u>
i.	The work of the past five years and the great changes in the first decade of the New Era
ii.	A new frontier in adapting Marxism to the Chinese context and the needs of the time
iii.	The new journey of the New Era: Missions and Tasks of the Communist Party of China
iv.	Accelerating the creation of a new development pattern and pursuing high-quality development
v.	Invigorating China through science and education and developing a strong workforce for the modernization drive
vi.	Advancing ‘Whole-Process People’s Democracy’ and ensuring that the people run the country
vii.	Exercising law-based governance on all fronts and advancing the rule of law in China
viii.	Building cultural confidence and strength, and securing new successes in developing socialist culture
ix.	Improving the people’s well-being and raising quality of life
x.	Pursuing green development and promoting harmony between humanity and nature
xi.	Modernizing China's National Security System and Capacity; and Safeguarding National Security and Social Stability
xii.	Achieving the centenary goal of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and further modernizing National Defense and the Military
xiii.	Upholding and improving the policy of One Country, Two Systems and Promoting National Reunification
xiv.	Promoting World Peace and Development and building a human community with a shared future
xv.	Exercising full and rigorous self-governance and advancing the great new project of party building in the New Era

Table 1: Themes of President Xi Jinping’s Speech to the 20th NPC
Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China

While major issues in the speech related to the imperative for the CPC to promote Marxist thought with Chinese characteristics, chart future ‘Party’ course towards retaining primacy in all affairs of the nation, guide national governance and explore the means to build a prosperous society; the need to modernise the national security apparatus and its capabilities also found substantial mention. The fact that a separate section was devoted towards ‘promotion of national reunification’, logically leads to the utmost necessity of reforming the PLA structures, and modernising its capabilities to ensure that all aspects of holistic national security are adequately addressed. The Chinese leader, in his speech, appeared to suggest a substantial compression in the timeline for ‘building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects’ by a good 14 years — from earlier announced timeline of 2049 to new goal of 2035.

The global media, which was watching the build-up to the 20th NPC with great interest, flooded the news-space after President Xi Jinping's speech. The Chinese media obviously extolled the virtues of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the focus of the CPC towards wholesome development of a modern socialist country.² The western media discourse, on the other hand, ranged from discussing the nuances of zero-Covid policy, hardline approach towards Taiwan and national economic management, to global ambition fulfilment; and analysing the implications arising therefrom.³ A few commentaries did discuss the Chinese focus on revamping of its national security system, particularly the need to safeguard national security through more robust 'strategic deterrence' measures.⁴

However, very crucial Presidential statements portraying his overarching vision towards making China into a 'great maritime power' appeared to have missed the media scrutiny altogether. This could possibly be due to 'matters maritime' finding rather unobtrusive mention in the middle of long, winding paragraphs sub-titled with rhetorical jargon like '*accelerating the creation of a new development pattern*', '*safeguarding social stability*', or '*pursuing high-quality development*'. Another more plausible explanation is that the bulk of global media — like many scholars, academics, and strategists — suffers from a sense of 'sea-blindness',⁵ where 'matters maritime' often do not find adequate salience in their collective mind-space, and hence do not generate enough interest.

Be that as it may, the scholarship undertaken at the National Maritime Foundation — India's foremost institution for maritime research — critically looks at all 'matters maritime' which underpin the economic and societal well-being of the global populace, predicated upon ocean governance, trade, connectivity, rules-based order, and related mechanisms. This article thus, analyses those statements of Presidential intent that distinctly relate to the Chinese maritime domain, and which have huge implications for the world at large. Following four clear pronouncements merit further attention, and are dealt in subsequent sections:

- (a) *"We will develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, and step-up efforts to build China into a strong maritime country."*⁶

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "20th National Congress of Communist Party of China opens in Beijing, Xi Jinping delivers report to Congress on behalf of 19th CPC Central Committee," 16 October 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221018_10785042.html

³ John Ruwitch, "These are 4 key points from Xi's speech at the Chinese Communist Party congress," *npr*, 16 October 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/16/1129277377/china-xi-jinping-communist-party-congress-speech-takeaways>

⁴ Full sentence in the paragraph under section XII of the Presidential speech with heading 'Achieving the Centenary Goal of the People's Liberation Army and Further Modernizing National Defense and the Military' states thus: "*We will establish a strong system of strategic deterrence, increase the proportion of new-domain forces with new combat capabilities, speed up the development of unmanned, intelligent combat capabilities, and promote coordinated development and application of the network information system.*" Many a global media have alarmingly interpreted this statement to mean that China will substantially increase its nuclear deterrence arsenal and related capabilities. For instance, see James Areddy, "Xi Speech Raises Nuclear Concerns," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/china-xi-jinping-communist-party-congress/card/speech-phrase-raises-nuclear-alert-fsZhkM0PJYNChCiLOBtD>

⁵ The term 'sea-blindness' often refers to compulsive and systemic neglect of the maritime spaces surrounding a Nation-State, to the detriment of its national security and economic progress. In the context of India, See Admiral Arun Prakash, "China has become a Maritime Power: It's time India caught up", *Indian Express*, 21 June 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-rivalry-maritime-power-navy-7367947/>

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," *ibid*, Section IV, sub-section 4.

(b) *“We will strengthen the safeguards for ensuring economic, major infrastructure, financial, cyber, data, biological, resource, nuclear, space, and maritime security.”*⁷

(c) *“We will strengthen our capacity to ensure overseas security; and protect the lawful rights and interests of Chinese citizens and legal entities overseas.”*⁸

(d) *We will safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests; and resolutely defend our country’s sovereignty, security, and development interests.”*⁹

Develop the Marine Economy; Protect the Marine Ecological Environment; Build China into a Strong Maritime Country

This Presidential statement is just a reiteration of Beijing’s national effort of becoming a global power through comprehensive ascendancy in all aspects encompassing the maritime domain. President Hu Jintao, during his keynote address as the General Secretary of CPC, had made a similar pitch for ‘building China into a maritime great power’, during the 18th National Party Congress in November 2012. President Hu, at that time, envisioned four ‘must-dos’ for China to be considered as a ‘maritime great power’: the ability to exploit ocean resources; be a developed maritime economy; preserve the marine environment; and resolutely protect the maritime rights and interests.¹⁰

The progression of the ‘maritime growth’ agenda has also transcended the leadership change, as is evident from the follow-up actions by President Xi Jinping — since assuming the top office — in 2013, wherein he propounded a ‘four transformations’ plan during a study session.¹¹ These broadly translate as follows:

- Transform maritime economy towards quality and efficiency
- Transform marine development methods towards sustainable use
- Transform marine science and technology (S&T), mainly through innovation
- Transform the ‘protection of national maritime rights and interests’ to enable unified planning

This absolute consistency in the national thought process — right from top to bottom, and across all functional departments of the CPC and the Chinese national governance structures — was quite apparent when the 13th Five-year Plan (2016-2020) promulgated by the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) for implementation, virtually articulated the same goals. The document stated that *“We [China] will pursue coordinated land and marine development, develop the marine economy, effectively develop marine resources, protect marine ecosystems*

⁷ Ibid, Section XI, sub-section 1.

⁸ Ibid, Section XI, sub-section 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Liza Tobin, “Underway – Beijing’s Strategy to Build China into a Maritime Great Power,” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 2 (2018): 18.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 24.

and habitats, and safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, building China into a strong maritime country."¹²

The 13th Five Year Plan also spelt out science, technology and innovation as enabling tools for achieving the three laid-down objectives — strengthening marine economy, protecting marine resources and environments, safeguarding maritime rights and interests — towards attainment of ‘maritime great power’ status. The plan laid down the following road map for action:¹³

- Develop marine S&T
- Achieve breakthroughs in advanced marine technology to enable deep-sea operations
- Make innovations in market-based allocation methods for ocean and island resources
- Strengthen research on marine climate change, marine disaster monitoring, risk evaluation, disaster prevention and mitigation

The 13th Five Year Plan, accordingly, identified the following four specific projects relating to the maritime realm, to be driven by science, technology and innovation efforts:¹⁴

- Restore the natural state of shoreline, bays and gulfs under ‘Blue Bay’ environment improvement project.
- Achieve breakthroughs in key technological developments related to marine and deep-sea exploration platforms, submersibles, equipment and applications.
- Construct a multi-dimensional global ocean observation network for real-time online monitoring of ocean space and its characteristics.
- Expand the scope of polar exploration by building advanced icebreakers; setting up new research and observation stations in the Arctic and the Antarctic; and improving polar aviation capabilities.

Strengthen the Safeguards for Ensuring Maritime Security

While the Presidential statement has combined the imperative to strengthen the safeguards for ensuring national security — covering economic, infrastructural, financial, cyber, data, biological, resource, nuclear, space and maritime domains — in one sentence,¹⁵ the measures adopted towards enhancing maritime security over the last decade are all too apparent. The latest reform and reorganisation process of the PLA — the PLA Navy being a component thereof — that was

¹² National Development and Reform Commission, “13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of People’s Republic of China (2016–2020)”, December 2016, chapter 41, <https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/8232/201612/P020191101481868235378.pdf>. Word in box bracket added by the Author to impart clarity to the statement.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Op. cit. 7.

kickstarted in 2015, has sought to overhaul the entire thought-process on national security. The maritime security imperative has found greater salience with the increase in the strength of the PLA Navy hardware and personnel. The PLA Navy has since grown to be the largest navy in the world with about 355 ships and submarines, and the capabilities to conduct naval combat missions in its ‘near seas’ as well as sustain non-traditional maritime security tasks into distant seas.¹⁶

The other major reform has been the placement of the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) — which was earlier subordinated to the State Oceanic Administration — under the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2018. The CCG now forms a component of the People’s Armed Police (PAP), with its role and terms of employment in times of peace and war governed by the Chinese Coast Guard Law which came in force on 01 February 2021.¹⁷ The CCG, over the past decade, has grown into the largest maritime law enforcement organisation in the World with more than 200 ships — of which 130 vessels displace more than 1000 tonnes.¹⁸ In order to further bolster the capacity of the Coast Guard for ‘near seas’ protection, 20 out of 72 PLA Navy’s Type 056 corvettes — all less than 10 years old — have reportedly been transferred to the CCG.¹⁹

The Chinese Coast Guard Law also provides legal sanction for the CCG to engage in maritime security missions in ‘maritime areas under Chinese jurisdiction’ without actually defining the spatial extent of these seas. A Japanese Ministry of Defence communique however, cites a 2018 interpretation of ‘maritime areas under Chinese jurisdiction’ by the Chinese People’s Supreme Procuratorate as “*areas [encompassing] internal waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone, and continental shelf of the People’s Republic of China, as well as other maritime areas over which the PRC has jurisdiction.*”²⁰ This ambiguity in operational areas of responsibility (AOR) of the Chinese Coast Guard legally empowers the force to carry out its tasks even in the areas under dispute, as has been witnessed in the South China Sea, and off Senkaku islands.

Strengthen the Capacity to Ensure Overseas Security, and Protect the Lawful Rights and Interests of Chinese Citizens and Legal Entities Overseas

The Chinese Defence White Paper of May 2015 entitled ‘China’s Military Strategy’ states that “*It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, **protect***

¹⁶ Congressional Research Service, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress”, 10 November 2022, p. 2. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11719/4>

¹⁷ Xinhua, Chinese Defence White Paper-2019, “China’s National Defense in the New era”, July 2019, Section IV, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

¹⁸ Japanese Ministry of Defence, “The Coast Guard Law of the People’s Republic of China”, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/d_act/sec_env/ch_ocn/index.html. Also see, Congressional Research Service, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress” *ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁹ Liu Xuanzun, “PLA Navy’s corvette transfers to coast guard ‘reflect development of both forces’”, Global Times 23 February 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1252998.shtml#:~:text=About%20%20Type%20056%20corvettes,in%20magazine%2C%20reported%20on%20Monday.>

²⁰ Japanese Ministry of Defence, “The Coast Guard Law of the People’s Republic of China”, *ibid*. Word in box bracket added by the Author to impart clarity to the statement.

*the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, ... so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.*²¹

The ‘overseas interests’ were further disaggregated into those involving overseas energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), Chinese nationals, and legal persons overseas. The protection these ‘overseas interests’ was recognised as a crucial requirement for China, in its Defense White Paper of 2012 — released in April 2013.²² The Chinese Defense White Paper of 2019 brought the security of ‘overseas interests’ to the centre stage by asserting that these interests were “... *endangered by immediate threats such as international and regional turmoil, terrorism, and piracy*”; and that one of the missions of China’s armed forces was to “... *effectively protect the security and legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese people, organizations and institutions*”.²³(sic)

The very fact that the ‘protection of Chinese overseas interests, citizens and legal entities’ has been included in the country’s consecutive Defence White Papers since 2012 as one of the missions for the Chinese ‘Defence Forces’, clearly indicates Beijing’s intent to utilise its rapidly modernising navy for this task too. The continuous and ongoing deployment of anti-piracy task forces — each comprising three PLA Navy ships — to the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia for last 14 years is a live testimony to the seriousness accorded by Beijing to the security of its ‘overseas interests’. It thus came as no surprise that the issue found prominent mention in the Presidential ‘work report’ speech of October 2022.

Safeguard China’s Maritime Rights and Interests; Resolutely Defend Sovereignty and Security

China enacted the ‘Law of the People’s Republic of China Concerning the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, 1992’, wherein it introduced the term ‘maritime rights and interests’ for the first time.²⁴ This has since, become an important element of the evolving Chinese maritime strategy. While the phrase ‘safeguarding of China’s maritime rights and interests’ continued to find greater mention in consecutive Chinese defence White Papers commencing 1998, it now finds clear mention as one of the aims of China’s national defence in the Chinese Defence White Paper of 2019.²⁵

China’s 13th Five-Year Plan mentions the following activities that must be undertaken in order to ‘safeguard its maritime rights and interests’:²⁶

- Strengthen the capabilities of maritime law enforcement organisations
- Deepen historical and legal research on maritime issues

²¹ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Military Strategy (Full Text)”, May 2015, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm. Part of the sentence highlighted by the Author to lay emphasis on the point.

²² The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces”, 16 April 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7181425.htm

²³ Chinese Defense White Paper-2019 *ibid*, Sections I and III respectively.

²⁴ Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone, 25 February 1992, Article 1, https://www.un.org/depts/los/LEGISLATIONANDTREATIES/PDFFILES/CHN_1992_Law.pdf.

²⁵ Chinese Defense White Paper-2019 *ibid*, Section II.

²⁶ National Development and Reform Commission, “13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of People’s Republic of China (2016–2020)” *ibid*.

- See that maritime torts²⁷ are properly handled
- Ensure navigational freedom and maritime safety within waters under China’s jurisdiction
- Actively participate in the establishment and protection of international and regional maritime order
- Improve dialogue and cooperation mechanisms with neighbouring countries regarding maritime issues, and promote pragmatic maritime cooperation
- Further improve mechanisms for coordinating marine affairs

Enforcement of these objectives on the ground obviously requires China to be a more robust maritime player, and to maintain comprehensive presence in all realms of maritime domain. The Chinese leadership realised this quite early, with the then Premier, Zhu Rongji, providing State support and subsidies to Chinese State-owned shipbuilding yards in the 1980s. This policy reform, pursued relentlessly for close to three decades, resulted in China becoming the world’s largest shipbuilder by 2010, overtaking the Republic of Korea in the process.²⁸ The same Chinese State-owned shipyards also build warships and submarines. The cross transfer of technology, processes and research in ancillary activities like metallurgy, chemical engineering and propulsion machinery has substantially reduced the warship construction time while raising their quality. This has enabled the Chinese shipyards to build between 12 to 16 warships and submarines annually for the last decade.

This large-sized fleet has augmented the combat capabilities of the PLA Navy to such an extent, that it is now in a position to dominate the Chinese ‘near-sea’ regions. This is particularly visible in the South China Sea where the Chinese President’s assertion to “*Safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests; resolutely defend sovereignty and security*”²⁹ finds deliberate and well-planned implementation in and around the sea areas surrounding the dispute Paracel and Spratly Island chains.

While the PLA Navy and the CCG are Beijing’s tools for exercising ‘hard’ options for ‘defending sovereignty and security’, and ‘safeguarding China’s maritime rights and interests’; the Chinese maritime militia, organised as an informal force comprising fishermen trained by the Chinese maritime security agencies, does so in a more subtle and nuanced manner. The Chinese Defence White Paper of 2010 also acknowledges that the militia is an important component and backup force of the PLA.³⁰ Such maritime militiamen are provided with metal hardened fishing boats and other gear by the ‘agencies’; and are also funded and often given cash incentives for carrying out proactive presence and harassment tasks in supposed ‘maritime areas under the Chinese jurisdiction’. This is the part of a well-thought-out Chinese strategy, whereby Beijing is able to effectively protect its maritime rights in a ‘below the conflict threshold’ manner in its

²⁷ The word ‘tort’ is derived from Latin word ‘*tortum*’ which means something twisted, wrong or crooked. In this case, it can be interpreted as all activities inconsistent with the Chinese maritime laws, and those that interfere with their maritime interests.

²⁸ Research in China, ‘China Shipbuilding Industry Report, 2009-10’, <http://www.researchinchina.com/Htmls/Report/2010/5848.html>

²⁹ Op. cit. 9.

³⁰ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense in 2010”, 31 March 2011, Section V, March 2011, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284525.htm

given ‘areas of interest’ without use of the PLA Navy or the CCG. This, more often than not, fulfils the Chinese aim of making incremental gains on the ground, without affording the recourse of exercising ‘hard’ response option, to the affected adversary.

Conclusion

All the policy pronouncements related to Beijing assiduously pursuing the *mantra* of holistic ascendancy in the maritime domain towards becoming a great power, have been articulated in brief innocuous sentences in President Xi Jinping’s ‘work report’ of 16 October 2022. That these are just reiterations of what has consistently been under implementation in the country since at least, the dawn of the new millennium, is quite obvious. The Chinese President has now formally placed them in the most important — as also most visible — ‘Party’ Document, as the national ‘key result areas’ (KRAs).

Since the whole ‘work report’ speech had domestic orientation covering various themes related to governance of the nation — as mentioned at Table 1 — and the CPC’s indispensable leadership towards their successful execution; the country’s foreign policy and consequently, the names of other countries did not find any mention. The same was the case with India and the Indian Ocean Region too. However, it is posited that all the ‘means’ mentioned in the Presidential speech towards the ‘end’ of “*building China into a strong maritime country*” have elements that can be leveraged quite easily at any given time towards the fulfilment of its foreign policy agenda. The US acknowledges it as such, with its concerns with regard to the aims of Chinese naval modernisation being expressed thus: “*China’s military modernization effort, including its naval modernization effort, is assessed as being aimed at developing capabilities for, among other things, ... displacing U.S. influence in the Western Pacific; and asserting China’s status as the leading regional power and a major world power.*”³¹(sic)

And if the US, lying across the vast Pacific Ocean is so concerned; India located in the Indian Ocean just adjacent to the Western Pacific — where many a Chinese interest lie — and sharing an un-demarcated land border with ongoing friction, had better be worried too.

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³¹Congressional Research Service, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress” *ibid*, p. 4.