One of the most noteworthy events that took place in the Indo-Pacific recently was, undoubtedly, the fourth plenary session of the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee (elected in October 2017), held from 28 to 31 October in Beijing.

The previous (3rd) plenary session of the 19th Central Committee (19th CC), which had taken place one and a half years earlier in February 2018, was of fundamental significance to modern China, because the decisions made at the time (and subsequently adopted into law by the National People’s Congress) allowed the current CPC and PRC leader, Xi Jinping, to de facto head the ruling party and the government for an indefinite period of time.

From the author’s point of view, the aforementioned decisions were both necessary and inevitable in the context of serious internal and external issues emerging as ambitious national development plans were being implemented, which had been formulated by Xi Jinping himself as far back as the end of 2012 (i.e. before he was elected to the posts of General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee and Chairman of the Central Military Commission).

At the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, it became obvious that the world-wide rivalry between the PRC and the global superpower would intensify. And the new U.S. administration, headed by the Republican Donald Trump, essentially accelerated the process of focusing U.S. key interests in the Indo-Pacific, which had begun under the
The timeliness of the decisions made during the 3rd plenary session is evidenced by the “trade war” with the United States that started just 2 to 3 months after the event. And it became one of the main reasons for the overall decline of the global economy as well as that of China. At the same time, the situation in the South China Sea and tensions between China and Taiwan intensified, and PRC’s relationship with its giant Asian neighbor, i.e. India, became more complicated.

Secessionist issues within China, in large part spurred on by forces outside the country, came to the fore once again. We are referring, first and foremost, here to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Increasingly worsening situations in both of them have prompted propaganda attacks against China by the PRC’s main geopolitical opponent.

It looked as if the second “informal” meeting between the leaders of China and India in the resort town of Mahabalipuram, which had taken place two weeks prior to the 4th plenary session being discussed in this article, allowed the two sides to, in part, work through the biggest issues plaguing their bilateral relations, which had arisen as a consequence of the revocation of the special status of the (now former) Jammu and Kashmir state.

But this was not the case. Once the corresponding government bill from 5 August, signed into law by the Parliament of India, came into effect on 31 October of this year, PRC’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson made a harsh statement about the move and India’s Ministry of External Affairs responded in kind. The cause of bickering between the two sides is the unresolved issue of ownership over Ladakh (bordering Tibet), India’s part of it now has the union territory status. We would like to remind our readers that Ladakh was divided between India and China as a result of the Sino-Indian war in 1962.

Although there is no openly publicized evidence of any discussions on this topic during the recently held 4th plenary session, according to the communique released at the end of the event, a report delivered by Xi Jinping had been greeted by overwhelming support from members of the CPC Central Committee. And considering the current internal and external climate, such an outcome was not unexpected.

One could get acquainted with the contents of the aforementioned document here, for instance. The communique confirms the importance of two dates in 2021 and 2049 that mark the centenary of the birth of the CPC (in 1921) and of the establishment of the PRC (in 1949), as well as that of an “in-between” date in 2035.

Important goals (described in fairly general terms) to do with improving the workings of the nation state and of all the governance frameworks ought to be achieved by the three aforementioned dates. The importance of the system of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (a meme with a decades-long history) was also noted. And when Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the CPC, this concept was “modified” by the phrase “in the new era”.

It is worth pointing out that during this nation’s history spanning 5,000 years (a number mentioned in the communique), one could probably find periods which could be described by the aforementioned “Chinese characteristics” (current to this very date).

In addition, the general nature of the wording used probably stems from the acute uncertainty associated with the state and direction of the changes the world order is undergoing at present, and from the inherent unreliability of any forecasts about what the global political map will look like in a few years’ time. And clearly, the outlook is even less certain for any future 10-year periods.

The tools used to reach the goals by the aforementioned dates are the 13 key principles, the first of which stresses the overarching role of the CPC in all spheres of governance. Three others that stand out among the rest are “the independent foreign policy of peace”, “the one country, two systems principle” and “the absolute leadership of the CPC over the military”.

There are no doubts as to who these principles are addressed to, i.e. the young protesters in Hong Kong who have become quite a headache for Beijing. And a member of the National People’s Congress must have been referring to the demonstrators when he said that the central government would “continue to exercise its full governance over Hong Kong and Macao” at the press-conference on the plenary session. Hence, “the implementation and improvement of the national security legislation and enforcement mechanism” in China’s special administrative regions (SARs) will be strengthened.

Earlier, it had been reported that Beijing fully backed the Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, who was forced to
resign by these very same “protesters”.

As for the third principle from the aforementioned list, it appears to be particularly relevant considering the fact that China’s relationship with its key geopolitical rival is “on the verge of falling apart”, first and foremost, in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. Therefore, it is crucial for the PRC to have complete political control over its own military, especially in conflict-ridden areas.

At this point, it seems apt to mention fairly frequent expert forecasts stating that the process of forming the modern armed forces of the PRC may have an unintended “side-effect”, i.e. the creation of a “clan” comprising professional military personnel who will have their own views on when and how to resolve the nations’ internal and external problems.

In order to counter this threat the government faces and its really grim consequences for China’s relationship with the United States, the PRC leader was placed at the helm of all the key mechanisms of the state, including its military.

Clearly, the Chinese leadership is still keen on keeping the possibility of improving the relations with the world power alive. The same also applies to other important regional players, including India and Japan. Judging by Donald Trump’s recent tweets, the U.S. President is similarly disposed, as he gave a positive assessment of the most recent round of Sino-American negotiations on bilateral trade issues. Donald Trump has also indicated that he may meet with the Chinese leader in the near future.

The talk given by the US Secretary of State at the Hudson Institute a day earlier (i.e. at the end of the 4th plenary session of the CPC Central Committee) was clearly out of step with the statements later made by the American President. It is also worth highlighting that during his speech, Mike Pompeo referred to the will of his leader while seemingly unaware of what the latter would say about the PRC the very next day.

As if sinology was his hobby, the US Secretary of State essentially told the Chinese what would be either good or bad for them. And the latter category included the fact that the CPC was at the helm of modern China.

Still, it is worth pointing out that in comparison to the statements made by the U.S. administration one and a half years ago about the supposed “yellow threat” posed by the PRC, the most recent attempt by Mike Pompeo to “give a lecture” to the Chinese looks relatively benign. However, it would be even better if he had avoided publicly expressing his own opinion on a subject that he really “does not get”.

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate that the control the CPC exercises over the core government functions of the second most powerful nation in the world is, among other things, a guarantee of ensuring stability in the region and even the whole planet.

And it is a positive development that the scheduled session of the CPC body, comprising top leadership, re-affirmed the crucial role the party plays in modern China.

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