At the end of October, the Chinese Communist Party held its 19th National Congress. The CCP has held these gatherings every five years since 1977, when Deng Xiaoping, the father of reform-era China, took power at the 11th party congress. Mao Zedong had died the year before, leaving the party in turmoil and the country in shambles in the wake of his Cultural Revolution. Deng set out to establish order, institutionalize the relationship between the party and the state, and set China on the path toward opening and reform.
It took 20 years for “Deng Xiaoping Theory,” which laid out “the basic issues concerning building, consolidating, and developing socialism in China,” to be enshrined in the CCP constitution at the 15th National Congress, held in September 1997. Deng, who had passed away February of that year, didn’t live to see the day.

Having effectively ruled China for two decades, Deng must have had little doubt about his place in Chinese history. Then again, Mao ruled China for most of three decades only to have his own legacy discarded in less than twelve months. Perhaps that’s why China’s current president, chairman of the Central Military Commission, and general secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, has left nothing to chance. Just five years into his rule, he has arranged for “Xi Jinping Thought” to be enshrined in the constitution.

The resolution encapsulating Xi Jinping thought, which goes under the unwieldy title “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” was unanimously passed by the 2,287 delegates to the party congress. The resolution opens with an obligatory endorsement of all Xi’s policies to date, which were summed up in the 14 points of Xi’s opening speech to the congress. It ends with
a pious exhortation to the party faithful to “think in big-picture terms” while firmly upholding the “leadership of the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core.” In between is the heart of the program, a 131-word statement of Xi’s program of governance. Such a concise governing philosophy is worth quoting in full:

The Communist Party of China shall uphold its absolute leadership over the People’s Liberation Army and other people’s armed forces; implement Xi Jinping’s thinking on strengthening the military; strengthen the development of the People’s Liberation Army by enhancing its political loyalty, strengthening it through reform and technology, and running it in accordance with the law; build people’s forces that obey the Party’s command, can fight and win, and maintain excellent conduct; ensure that the People’s Liberation Army accomplishes its missions and tasks in the new era; foster a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation; uphold justice while pursuing shared interests; work to build a community with a shared future for mankind; follow the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration; and pursue the Belt and Road Initiative.
Of the ten clauses, the first five focus on the military, the next four on society, and the final one on foreign policy, which serves as a tidy summary of Xi’s priorities—and likely those of the CCP as a whole. The world may look hopefully to Xi’s speeches for signs of liberal internationalism, but Xi Jinping Thought is an unabashed program of national revival backed up by increasing military power.

PARTY FIRST, ARMY SECOND

Although the clear first principle of Xi Jinping Thought is Party First, Xi himself is better known for his Chinese Dream of building “a moderately prosperous society” amid a program of “national rejuvenation.” Put “Party First” ahead of the “Chinese Dream” and you get an authoritarian version of a prosperity gospel that might be called America First with Chinese Characteristics. Xi may be the supreme leader of a dictatorship, but that doesn’t mean that he is immune to politics. And as China’s growth slows, nationalism is a ready substitute for economic performance in maintaining public confidence in the CCP’s leadership.

When it comes to stoking nationalist fervor, spending on the military is worth every yuan.
Deng was willing to use tanks to impose his vision for China’s future, most notoriously in the June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre. Xi is equally concerned about keeping the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) under the control of the CCP, but these days the PLA is more likely to be engaged in the Himalayas or the South China Sea than in the streets of Beijing. For Xi, the PLA is more useful as a tool for fostering jingoistic populism than for direct political repression.

So although Xi is careful to publicly insist on the primacy of political over military authority, that almost goes without saying in today’s China. The PLA no longer poses an immediate threat to the Chinese people; its new planes and aircraft carriers are much more of a menace to China’s neighbors than to its civilian population. And all the indications are that muscular militarism is just as popular in China as it is in the United States, if not more so. The first major element of Xi Jinping Thought is thus the transformation of the PLA from a reserve force for internal repression into a combat force capable of projecting Chinese power in the world.

NATION, BELT, AND ROAD

The second half of Xi Jinping Thought is community, both internal and external. The internal community is the community of the
“Chinese nation,” which a relatively new concept in Chinese politics. The old Republic of China, before the exile of its government on Taiwan, used to maintain a doctrine of the so-called five nations of China: Han (Chinese), Manchu, Mongols, Hui (or Muslims), and Tibetans. From its founding in 1949, the People’s Republic of China officially recognized a myriad of national minorities, originally echoing the official propaganda of the Soviet Union in constructing the country as a union of many nations. Xi Jinping Thought leaves all that behind.

In Xi’s China, there is only one nation—the Chinese nation. Inevitably constructed around the majority Han identity, Chinese nationalism is consolidating (with strong official support) around a standardized Mandarin language and an anodyne, twenty first century version of Confucianism. Outside China, these two initiatives are combined in the controversial Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government-funded language and culture centers that are embedded in some 500 universities worldwide. What Confucius Institutes attempt to accomplish abroad, state media and school curricula relentlessly promote at home: a vision of China as a unified nation-
state that not only commands the obedience but also merits the loyalty of its citizens.

Whereas late imperial and even early republican China saw itself as a community of nations, modern-century China is returning to the more ancient idea of China as the central state of a wider Eurasian world, or tianxia. The very word for China in Chinese, Zhongguo, literally means Central State (or, more poetically, Middle Kingdom), and until the integration of China into a European-centered world-economy China was indeed the central state of its own, largely distinct world. Xi’s signature foreign policy initiative, the One Belt, One Road program of Eurasian infrastructure development, is explicitly designed to put China back at the economic and political center of the continent.

THE 2021 CENTENARY

In 2021, China will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the CCP. This landmark centenary will presumably be celebrated in conjunction with the 20th National Congress, and Xi will set the agenda. No one knows whether and to what extent Xi will extend his rule beyond 2021, but it is almost certain that he
will use the 2021 centenary of the CCP as an opportunity to imprint his understanding of China’s national identity in the hearts of his compatriots and the minds of the world.

Xi Jinping Thought may seem at first glance a meaningless slogan, but on deeper inspection it reveals a unified program of, to use Xi’s words, “national rejuvenation.” Frenchmen might look to the French Revolution, Germans to the 1848 Spring of Nations, Japanese to the Meiji Restoration, and Italians to the Risorgimento for a better understanding of Xi’s project. Xi Jinping Thought is nothing less than a program for the birth of a post-communist (although not post-party) Chinese nation-state.

The full name for his agenda, “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” betrays the key point. Socialism with Chinese characteristics has been a mainstay of CCP propaganda since the Deng era. The new era, the Xi era, is still a work in progress. The dual transformations needed to usher it in—of the PLA and of the Chinese nation itself—are still underway. Look for the culmination of Xi’s political project, the birth of a new Chinese nation-state, at the CCP centenary in 2021. Until then, we can only guess at what the future will really look like. Perhaps
Xi himself doesn’t even know, but he’ll be sure to have an answer ready in five years.

CORRECTION APPENDED (November 16, 2017)

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that the centenary of the CCP will take place in 2022. It will take place in 2021.