

Q & A

Aaron Friedberg on What the U.S. Got Wrong About China

The professor talks about his latest book; why engagement was a gamble, not a blunder; what changed after Tiananmen; and why the U.S. should take a stronger line against China.

BY DAVID BARBOZA — SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

Aaron L. Friedberg is a distinguished political scientist and a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University. He has served in government, as a deputy assistant for national security affairs in the Office of the Vice President of the United States. In November 2006, he was named to the Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Democracy Promotion. He has also been a fellow at the Smithsonian Institution's Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Norwegian Nobel Institute, and Harvard University's Center of International Affairs. Dr. Friedberg is the author of several books, including [The Weary Titan, 1895-1905: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline](#) (1988), [In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy](#) (2000) and [Getting China Wrong](#) (2022). In this lightly edited Q&A, Professor Friedberg explains why he believes the U.S. should take a stronger line on China.



Aaron Friedberg.

Illustration by Kate Copeland

Q: Your book *Getting China Wrong* paints a rather dark portrait of the U.S.-China relationship. Can you first outline the state of relations between Beijing and Washington? How bad are things?

A: We're in a period in which for the first time both sides see themselves as engaged in an intense geopolitical, technological and ideological rivalry. And the change has more to do with us rather than with them. The CCP [Chinese Communist Party] leadership has seen itself engaged in that kind of struggle with the United States since the end of the Cold War. But for quite a long time, successive U.S. administrations didn't see the relationship in those terms. People were optimistic and tended either to explain away, downplay or ignore mounting evidence that things were not going in the direction that we had hoped. That really has changed. One can argue about when things started to change, but by the end of Obama's second term [in January 2017], there

really had begun to be a shift in attitudes, certainly in Congress. You had growing support for tougher measures on China, from both political parties. Of course, there was the 2016 election of Trump, which was a disruptive event in so many ways. And this accelerated the recognition, on the U.S. side, of the deeply conflictual nature of the relationship. And now we're in a period where both sides see it in very stark terms.

It's now pretty clear that this is the most difficult period since 1989, when the P.L.A. opened fire on its own people, in Tiananmen Square. Could you have even imagined we'd

be where we are today?

Well, it's certainly a more intense phase of the relationship than any we've seen before. You asked whether I could have imagined it. The short answer is yes, although perhaps not in exactly the ways that it's unfolded. In 2000, I wrote an article in *Commentary* [magazine] called "[The Struggle for Mastery in Asia](#)," which was a speculative exercise imagining the dimensions of intensified

competition between the U.S. and China. And I began by saying that [to paraphrase] "while nothing is inevitable, over the next 20 years the United States and China are likely to be engaged in an escalating rivalry. In fact, there are reasons to believe it's already underway." As China's power grew, it was likely that its leaders would begin to adopt a posture that was much more confrontational towards the United States. There was a lull in there when they felt they were relatively weak, but starting in the early 90s, they began working their way out from under the sanctions [imposed] after Tiananmen. They were kind of surveying the wreckage after the end of the Cold War. They concentrated on hiding their capabilities and biding time, as Deng Xiaoping said, while building up their strength. As part of that, they encouraged people in the West — especially in the United States — to believe that they wanted what we wanted. But that was never accurate. So as they grew stronger and more confident, those desires and ambitions, which are at odds with ours, have become clearer.

But didn't the U.S. want China to build up its capabilities? We helped China join the WTO. We encouraged American firms to not just export to China but to build factories there. We transferred technology to China and welcomed the best and brightest from their colleges to study at America's leading graduate schools. Looking back, isn't this what we wanted, a China that was healthier, more stable and rich enough to buy our goods and integrate into our system?



President Bush briefs the press on the early American response to Tiananmen Square, June 5, 1989. Credit: [George Bush Presidential Library and Museum](#)

"China is big, it is growing, and it will influence the world in the years ahead.

For the United States and the world, the essential question is – how will China use its influence?

To answer that question, it is time to take our policy beyond opening doors to China's membership into the international system: **We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder in that system."**

An excerpt from [Robert Zoellick's](#) remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005.

Credit: [NCUSCR](#) 

Well, we had a theory about how this was going to unfold; how China was going to liberalize. They were going to become a "[responsible stakeholder](#)" in the existing international system. We figured that they would see that their interests lay in upholding this system into which we had integrated them so they wouldn't try to change it in any radical way. We thought their economy would evolve towards something that more closely resembles our own, an open, market-based system. And they were also going to liberalize politically and eventually democratize. That meant the story had a happy ending. They'd be rich and more powerful, but their interests would coincide with ours. Some theoretically minded people argued that this would be good for peace, because

democracies tend not to fight each other. These are all liberal beliefs about the way the world works; they reflect our ideology. Of course, it wasn't just that; there was also a desire to make money, and various interest groups and companies and individuals who profited tremendously from the relationship had a strong interest in keeping it going. Most of those

people didn't consider it their responsibility to be too concerned about the strategic implications of what they were doing.

But isn't it the job of policy makers to assess strategy and to set policy towards China? Were they confused about whether China was an ally or a rival? This begs the question: what did the U.S. really want out of the relationship? What were the goals of administrations, from Nixon to Obama?

People who were involved in the early stages of our relationship with China, going back to the 70s and into the 80s, will sometimes say: "This was never what we had in mind." And they are telling the truth about what they thought at the time and what was happening then. But what happened after the end of the Cold War is different. Before that our aims were almost entirely strategic. With [Kissinger](#) and [Nixon](#), the idea was that we needed Chinese help if we're going to get out of Vietnam. But also, China was increasingly seen as a counterbalance to what was perceived to be the growing power of the Soviet Union. So through the 1980s, the purpose of U.S. strategy and policy towards China was to build up China's strength as a counter to Soviet power. And that was mostly done in fairly direct ways. We talked about selling them dual use technologies, then the Carter administration talked about non-lethal military technology. The Reagan administration was ready to sell them weapons, but didn't for various reasons. But we were also helping build up China's scientific and industrial base, building up its power with the thought that it was necessary to counter the Soviet Union. At the beginning, Kissinger and Nixon were pretty explicit, at least in private conversations with their Chinese counterparts, saying "We don't care about your domestic regime." Nixon's famous statement, "What matters to us is not how you treat your people but how you deal with the outside world." That was sincere, of course, but he couldn't quite go and say that in front of Congress.



Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter signing diplomatic agreements between China and the U.S., January 31, 1979.
Credit: Jimmy Carter Library

In addition, by the late 1970s and early 1980s you begin to get early optimism about where China's system is heading. After it came out of the Cultural Revolution, the country was devastated. And Deng comes in and starts to implement market-oriented reforms and growth takes off. There is a period in which there's more open discussion of political liberalization, certainly among intellectuals, even some people in the Party. And that encouraged this idea that China was on the right track, domestically. But Tiananmen and then the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was a few months later, and then the collapse of the Soviet Union, two years after that, really knocked the pillars out from under our Cold War strategy. On the one hand, the Soviet Union's gone, so why do we need to keep building up China if we don't have this big rival? At the same time, here's a regime that at least some people thought was going to liberalize and it's shooting students in the streets of the capital

city. There's a real question of whether we should continue with the policy that we've pursued. And what emerges is a set of rationales that fit together and justify a policy of engagement, and yes, there's this important economic part. But also, diplomatic, people to people, educational, scientific cooperation and so on. There was a new kind of geo-political rationale. Very early on, at the end of the George H.W. Bush administration in '91 right through the Clinton administration, U.S. officials started enumerating a list of global problems on which they hoped to have China's help. Proliferation is always near the top of the list, with a focus on North Korea and later Iran. Terrorism, piracy, communicable disease, climate change — things that people are still talking about now.

“ In retrospect, some people have tried to cast this as stupid or naive or just the result of greed. But I don't think that's the right way to view it. Engagement wasn't a blunder, it was a gamble. ”

So, in a sense, the U.S. and the West needed China's help, right?

Yes, the thinking was that China is going to be an emerging power. We need them on our side to deal with these problems. And eventually, China is going to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the existing system. Also, economic liberalization is a one way street. There is a process that's been set in motion and it can only end up in one place. And this view is supported by most economists and many people in the business world. They believe that as China opens up to the world, in order to be competitive it's going to have to shed state-owned enterprises. The government is going to have to rely more on market forces. And as China develops, it will have to become innovative technologically, and that too will require greater openness. So there are all these ideas about economic development. And in the background of all of this is the recent experience of the sudden and unexpected end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the progress that was being made at least in parts of the former Soviet Union towards economic liberalization. So China was seen as another theater where these same processes were going to unfold.

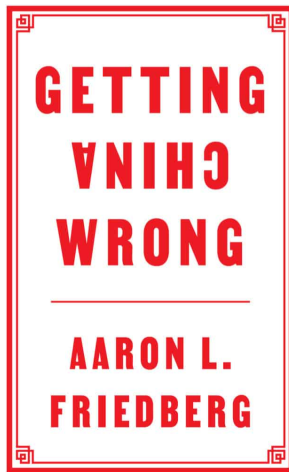
The last bit was about democratization. There are a set of overlapping rationales here that are informed to some extent by a social science theory; the idea that economic growth leads to the development of a middle class which has historically been the standard bearer for political liberalization. It happened in Europe in the 19th century. It happened in Asia in the 20th century, including fairly recently, in Taiwan and South Korea. It's going to happen in China too.

So there's an argument that political development will follow from economic growth. There's also an idea that democracy spreads in waves. [Samuel Huntington](#) published his book, *The Third Wave*, in the early '90s. He went back and looked at the spread of democracy historically, going back to the early 19th century, and he observed that it had happened in waves. He argued that we are now in the middle stages of a third wave that started in the 1970s, in Portugal and Spain. And so it's the wave of the future. This is the direction in which things are going. These were powerful beliefs.



Aaron Friedberg speaking at the “Defending Democracy: Combating Authoritarian Corrosion” Symposium held by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. Credit: [臺灣民主基金會 Taiwan Foundation for Democracy](#)

So from your standpoint, engagement was terribly flawed, or perhaps a good idea that eventually collided with the realities of China's rise and the interests of the Party? U.S. policy towards China failed, you argue.



Getting China Wrong by Aaron L. Friedberg. Published by [Polity](#), June 2022.

In retrospect, some people have tried to cast this as stupid or naive or just the result of greed. But I don't think that's the right way to view it. Engagement wasn't a blunder, it was a gamble. What I tried to do in the book is sketch out what I see as the CCP's counter strategy to our strategy. We had this idea that we're going to engage with them and transform them. But the CCP didn't want to be transformed. They wanted to maintain power. And they devised a counter strategy, which allowed them to take advantage of the benefits of engagement and to build wealth and power while retaining their grip on authority at home. What we missed was that this is a Leninist party, which has as its most essential principle an insistence on a monopoly of political power. There could have been change but the odds were against it. Look at what happened in the former Soviet empire. Those regimes were swept aside. They were mostly peaceful revolutions. It wasn't the Communist Party of the Soviet Union going and turning off the lights and giving up. In fact, the only [political]

party based on Leninist principles that I am aware of that willingly gave up power was the Kuomintang in Taiwan. So that's the thing we got wrong about China. We had a misunderstanding of the character of the regime. These guys were resourceful and they were ruthless and relentless. They had their eye on one thing, which never changed, which is: "We are not going to give up power." There was a belief that they were going to mellow or just eventually go away. And that was wrong.

Were there other possibilities along the way?

I don't think so. You can always argue about this but after Tiananmen, the possibility of political liberalization was really taken off the table. People who had even flirted with that idea were put under house arrest or driven into exile. Deng Xiaoping was never sympathetic to that idea. And as far as I am aware, there was nobody who ever rose to a position of equivalent prominence in the party who had any interest in it. So I think the possibility of peaceful evolution died at Tiananmen. And whereas we took those events as the last gasp of this authoritarian regime and a hopeful sign it was actually the opposite.

“The internal character of the [CCP] regime is fundamentally repressive, with no rule of law and no conception of individual rights or universal values.”

There were a series of things around the turn of the century that encouraged a belief in the West that there was some progress towards liberalization, but in retrospect that's not what it was at all. Some people pointed at that time to the growth of the Internet and the fact that people were allowed to say critical things within limits; also, the growth of nongovernmental organizations, the increasing role of lawyers and human rights organizations. But these were all part of an effort by the Party to co-opt the population and maintain the party's legitimacy. Recognizing that they couldn't just rely on putting more money in people's pockets, there were other things to be addressed and they didn't want to go back to pure repression. In fact, they were experimenting with new techniques for letting off steam, allowing the party to have some insight into things that people were unhappy about. But it was all part of an effort to strengthen the party. It was not intended to lead towards liberalization. And pretty

quickly, that broke down because those experiments were seen as having unleashed dangerous forces.

Similarly, on the economic side, Western observers were convinced that liberalization was inevitable. But there too, there was a misinterpretation of what was going on; starting with a misunderstanding of the growth strategy that was pursued in the '90s, which did involve the growth of the private sector, largely for export, but was also driven by state owned enterprises and massive capital investment with resources controlled by the state. And after China's entry

into [WTO](#) [in 2001], there was this belief that China had now committed itself to do a bunch of things that would inevitably carry it towards greater openness and reliance on the market. Whereas, in fact, when we look back, we can see that almost immediately things began to move in the opposite direction. Deng's colleague [Chen Yun](#) used the term "bird in the cage." The markets are the bird and the political system, the cage. The party will expand the role of market forces when they think they need them. But they'll also constrain them. And they have no intention of allowing them to get out of control because that risks undermining the power of the Party.

So a lot of that privatization was a charade? It seems hard to fathom.

They saw the virtues and advantages of having a vibrant private sector, but they also felt the need to keep it under control. One thing that runs through this whole story is a real arrogance on the part of people in the West, about the [end of history](#) and the idea of a single dominant model for economic and political development. There was a sort of dismissive attitude about the CCP and their talk about "socialism with Chinese characteristics." We failed to recognize that their way of thinking about economics is fundamentally different from ours. There's a liberal Western notion that the purpose of economic interaction is to promote welfare, individual welfare, and then the summing up of all those individuals for the national welfare. The focus is on absolute gains, as the economists say. But the CCP is always thinking about relative gains, because it's always thinking about power. The goal of economic policy is to enhance the power of the Party and the power of the Chinese nation.



Shi Guangshen, then Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation of China, signs China's Protocol on the Accession to the WTO at the 4th Ministerial Conference in Doha, November 2001. Credit: [WTO](#)



Xi Jinping speaking on behalf of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the State Council

So we failed to understand the nature of the regime, or the Party, which has not really changed. Is that right?

Yes. The internal character of the regime is fundamentally repressive, with no rule of law and no conception of individual rights or universal values. The CCP regime was always going to behave in ways that we would find objectionable and even odious. You could overlook that in some periods but it was always there and it was going to re-emerge, and it did re-emerge and it has metastasized and become more visible. The regime started cracking down on the internet and throwing lawyers in jail and shutting down NGOs, even before Xi Jinping. Some of the deterioration of relations that we've experienced recently had to do with the reaction to what happened in Hong Kong, starting in 2014. A lot of it now has to do with their treatment of the Uyghur minority. In my view, these abuses are a reflection of the fundamental character of the CCP regime. And they make it extremely difficult for the U.S. and other liberal democracies to maintain a sort of happy, stable business-like relationship with China.

The other thing that accelerated the change in thinking in the United States was China's increasingly aggressive external behavior. We had this idea that they wanted nothing more than to be members in good standing of this international system we helped create. The notion that they would be happy to join and not really want to change things reflects a certain lack of strategic empathy, to say the least. We didn't adequately appreciate the extent to which the regime has always felt threatened by the prevalence of American power and the universal values that we're always talking about. These were threatening to the regime. And when they got more powerful, they were determined to defend themselves against them and change the international system in certain ways. We can't just say, "Okay, fine. They're going to do what they're going to do. And we can't expect them to be like us, but we can have a perfectly good relationship with them." I don't think that's possible.



A protest held in Washington D.C. by the Uyghur American Association, March 3, 2021. Credit: Kuzzat Altay via [Unsplash](#)

Many have argued that China is a superpower and that the U.S. simply can't accept the rise of China. Should the U.S. accept that China is a dominant power and find ways to accommodate its rise?

Well, I'd say we shouldn't accept its dominance for strategic and moral reasons. If you look first at China's own neighborhood, 360 degrees around China, this has really been the primary focus of their strategy and policy for a very long time. They want to regain what they see as their rightful place as the dominant power in this domain. And the only real challenger is the United States, which they view as an interloper that doesn't really belong there. So naturally, if the United States can be persuaded (or forced) to reduce its role and pull back, China would emerge as the dominant power. And people are beginning to recognize the danger of allowing that to happen.

“ ... given what we know about the regime and its values, it seems to me we ought to be concerned about the growing use of its power to

reshape parts of the international system in ways that reflect the CCPs ideology and beliefs.

”

Why?

For one thing, we have a number of very prosperous democratic allies in Asia who without our help couldn't defend themselves and preserve their autonomy. We and everybody else also rely on the Western Pacific through which a large portion of the world's trade transits. It probably wouldn't be wise to depend on China to preserve freedom of navigation through those waters. So just in Asia alone, the stakes are pretty obvious. And in the past 10 years, certainly under Xi Jinping, the CCP leadership is beginning to think about what kind of a global role it wants. They haven't fully developed their view but the parts of it that we can see are pretty concerning. They would like, for instance, to keep the democracies divided. So, divide the Europeans from one another and divide Europe from the United States and divide Japan from the Europeans, for balance of power reasons. They would like to either gain control over or neutralize parts of multilateral institutions, the UN system in particular, so as to make them harmless from the CCPs perspective. But in doing that, they drain them of their original intended purpose. So changing the definitions of universal rights or putting their people in charge of [Interpol](#). They are also pushing hard to gain a position of prominence and influence in the [developing world](#). There's a question of how much that should concern us or what parts of it should concern us. But given what we know about the regime and its values, it seems to me we ought to be concerned about the growing use of its power to reshape parts of the international system in ways that reflect the CCPs ideology and beliefs. We created the so-called liberal international order. Although it's not the entire world, it was the Western world and it did reflect liberal values. And we encouraged and cooperated with other democracies and created more or less free trade zones and a rule of law because that reflected our beliefs. What do we think the world would look like if the PRC is the dominant power? It's not going to look like that.



China's Peacekeeping Infantry Battalion in Juba, South Sudan, February 27, 2015. Credit: United Nations
Photo via [Flickr](#).

Didn't the U.S. have enormous leverage in this relationship? It had technology, money, military might and the world's leading entrepreneurs. China had very little and was economically destitute.

Yes. We had a lot of leverage that we didn't use. China is still heavily dependent on us and our allies for markets and technology and capital. And even now, we're having difficulty trying to figure out how to use that strategically. We had much more leverage back at the beginning of this process, and we certainly could have tried to use that leverage to impose

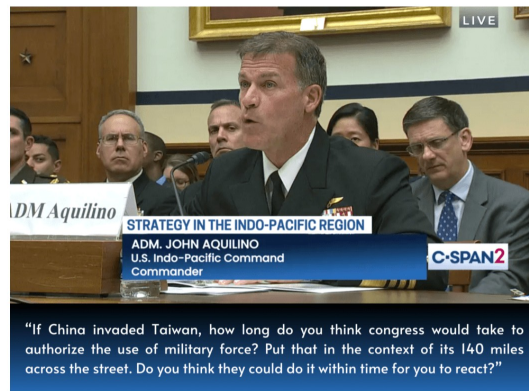
costs and try to nudge the regime in directions that were perhaps more favorable and more conducive to its positive evolution. I'm still skeptical that that would have worked. But for the most part we didn't try. And when we tried to apply pressure, the CCP was able to exploit the openness of our system to encourage people who lobbied very hard against doing that, primarily business interests. So our open democratic society, with all these multitudinous interests, has had a really hard time behaving strategically.

Engagement was a gamble and we should have been paying much more attention to the possible indications that it was not paying off. But we kept doubling down. It would have been better if we had been more honest with ourselves and more alert to what was happening and modulated our policy along the way, rather than getting into this situation where now we have to take some pretty big and perhaps drastic measures late in the game.

What do you think can be done?

The highest priority is political mobilization, democratic leaders speaking more candidly to their publics about the failure of the policies pursued; not casting blame but explaining how we got to where we are now. We should be emphasizing the root of the problem: the nature of their system and the CCP regime. It's not the Chinese people.

We also need to be focused on bolstering deterrence to discourage the CCP leadership from making the kind of miscalculation that Putin made when he invaded Ukraine. I just came back from a fact finding trip to Indo PACOM [Pacific Command] and people there are very concerned about the possibility of a conflict over Taiwan in the near term. That would be a catastrophe on many different levels. There's a longer term problem too, of competing militarily in order to maintain a balance of hard power that's still favorable to us.



Admiral John Aquilino, Commander of U.S. Indo PACOM, speaking at a House Hearing on U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region, March 9, 2022.
Credit: [C-Span](#)

Perhaps the most difficult challenge is to disentangle our economies to a degree. Not total decoupling, although we could wind up doing that if there were a war over Taiwan. In some sense, we've already started down this road: tightening FDI screening and imposing more rigorous export controls. We also need to restructure supply chains, so that we're not dependent on China for critical materials or personal protective medical equipment or things you might need in a military emergency. Advanced democracies need to reduce their dependence on China as a market and as a manufacturing platform. So that's the third thing, partial economic disengagement.

“There is a danger here of unleashing an irrational animosity, especially given the climate of our politics today. The last thing you want is political parties competing with each other to see who can say the harshest things and advocate the most extreme policies.”

And the last thing is waging what the CCP calls “discursive struggle.” We have to demonstrate and speak out about the advantages of our system. I think we've gotten very defensive about that, and not without reason. We haven't performed up to our own expectations and standards and we need to do that. But we also need to be blunt in pointing

out the flaws and failings of their system. There is still a great deal of hesitancy about doing that. I think there's this fear that we're going to create another Cold War. Well, from the CCP's perspective, we are already in a Cold War. They have no inhibitions about criticizing and attacking our system.

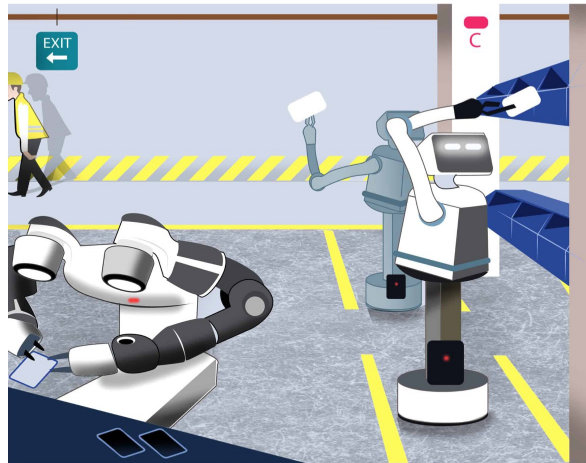
Is there any chance that firing up hostilities in the U.S. and provoking a kind of Red Scare could make things worse?

It's certainly possible to make things worse. I do think there are reasons to be cautious. I don't want to suggest otherwise. However, the CCP is pretty much unconstrained in the things they say, including propagating disinformation about us running biological weapons labs in Ukraine and all kinds of crazy stuff. We can't influence that. And we shouldn't try to match that. But we do need to respond. There is a danger here of unleashing an irrational animosity, especially given the climate of our politics today. The last thing you want is political parties competing with each other to see who can say the harshest things and advocate the most extreme policies. However, we can't allow that to inhibit us from doing the things we now need to do in order to defend ourselves.



David Barboza is the co-founder and a staff writer at The Wire. Previously, he was a longtime business reporter and foreign correspondent at The New York Times. [@DavidBarboza2](#)

● COVER STORY



China's Bot Boom

BY ISABELLA BORSHOFF

China became "the world's factory" in large part due to its demographics: a tidal wave of young, hungry workers drove growth by churning out low value goods. But between rapidly changing demographics and rising wages, those days are over. For China to maintain its reputation as a manufacturing powerhouse, it needs robots — lots of them. But can advanced manufacturing be a panacea for China's slowing economy?

● THE BIG PICTURE



Xiao Jianhua's Lost Empire

BY ELIOT CHEN

A look at Xiao Jianhua's financial empire: the companies involved, what's happened to them, and what, if anything, remains.

● NEWS AND ANALYSIS



What To Expect from the Twentieth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party

BY TONY SAICH

Tony Saich's best guesstimates on Xi's chances of reappointment, how the party's leadership structure will change, and what to look for in terms of future policy trends.



**Visit News
Products Store**

News Products

Our best open-source research on Chinese companies, as well as industry guides to 100 of the most influential people in a China-focused industry.

The Wire China Archives

[Read More Articles >](#)

The Wire *China*

[Your account](#)

[About Us](#) [Archives](#) [Contact Us](#)



[Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | ©2022 The Wire