

The Path of Chinese “Modernization”: A Keyword Analysis from the “13th Five-Year Plan” to the “15th Five-Year Plan”

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The 15-year period spanning the 13th to the 15th Five-Year Plans coincides with “great changes unseen in a century” and serves as a critical turning point for China’s internal economic restructuring. Looking back at the 13th Five-Year Plan phase, China’s goal was to comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society in all respects. Policy keywords centered around “supply-side structural reform” and “poverty alleviation,” marking Beijing’s effort at the time to transition from high-speed growth to high-quality development.

During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, facing intensified U.S.-China rivalry and the impact of the global pandemic, policy keywords rapidly shifted to “dual circulation,” “sci-tech self-reliance and self-strengthening,” and “common prosperity.” The keywords of this phase reflect China’s profound sense of crisis and security orientation, with the logic of economic development shifting from pure economic efficiency to the pursuit of security and distributive fairness.

Looking ahead to the 15th Five-Year Plan through the lens of the past decade, “new quality productive forces” and “Chinese modernization” have emerged as new keywords. It is foreseeable that over the next five years, the Chinese economy will focus on efforts to cross the middle-income trap and tackle critical challenges such as structural demographic issues.

The trajectory of Chinese “modernization” can be outlined by sorting through the “keywords” in the policy texts of these three periods. Methodologically, this analysis inventories the policy texts of China’s three most recent “Five-Year Plans,” utilizing “occurrences per 10,000 words” (word frequency) as the comparative baseline across periods to summarize the key trends for the 15th Five-Year Plan:

“Modernization” and “high-quality” as the core themes of the 15th Five-Year Plan: The frequency of the term “modernization” has seen explosive growth in the 15th Five-Year Plan, and “Chinese modernization” has become an entirely new core term. Similarly, the frequency of “high quality” has surged, indicating that policies have



comprehensively pivoted toward “high-quality economic development” rather than the pure pursuit of growth speed.

A shift from “cooperation and opening-up” to a “security strategy”: As evidenced by shifts in word frequency, China’s developmental logic is pivoting from external linkages to internal security. The frequencies of “strategy” and “security” have steadily climbed, highlighting risk prevention and control as critical issues. Conversely, the frequencies of “cooperation” and “opening-up” have markedly declined, reflecting that amid global turbulence, China is comprehensively turning toward an autonomous strategic plan grounded in bottom-line thinking.

Further analysis of the associated words for the keywords across each period reveals that even when the vocabulary remains identical across the three Five-Year Plans, their underlying connotations have undergone a qualitative transformation.

First, regarding security and reform. “Security” has been elevated from the historical levels of production and management to national strategic heights, encompassing the “economy,” “energy,” and “national defense.” Meanwhile, “reform” has shifted its focus from market and corporate mechanisms to serving national competitiveness and high-quality development.

Second, regarding modernization and technology. “Modernization” in the 15th Five-Year Plan returns to the economic and industrial spheres, but its core driving forces have become “technology” and “talent.” Technological innovation is no longer treated as an isolated link; instead, it emphasizes deep “integration” with the real economy.

Third, the strategic positioning of a strong nation. In the 15th Five-Year Plan, a “strong nation” forms tight associations with “green,” “security,” and “modernization.” This indicates that China’s future pursuit is to become a comprehensive power integrating technology and environmental protection, with security as an absolute prerequisite.

In summary, an overview of policy evolution over the past 15 years makes the trajectory of Chinese “modernization” distinctly clear. This includes the strategic center of gravity shifting from “cooperation and opening-up” to a defensive “security strategy,” with security taking precedence over economic development. China is also actively attempting to break away from the Western model, leveraging “new quality productive forces” to drive industrial upgrading and technological integration, thereby strengthening economic resilience. Finally, policy objectives have been elevated from

the micro-level improvement of market mechanisms to the macro-level architecture of national competitiveness.