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Xi Jinping, the Rise of Ideological Man, and the Acceleration of Radical Change in China

An Analysis of the 20th Party Congress and “Winner Takes All” in Politics, Policy, and Politburo Appointments

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If the international community needed further evidence that China under Xi Jinping has radically changed from that of the Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao era (1978-2013), the ideological, political, economic, foreign policy, and now personnel outcomes of the 20th Party Congress provide it in definitive abundance. Indeed, Xi himself, in his last Congress Report in 2017, proclaimed the beginning of a New Era. Some at the time thought this to be little more than a propagandistic over-claim. They were wrong. Welcome to the brave-new world of Xi Jinping where everything is being turned upside down.

And in all this, Xi’s signature themes are twofold: first, the return of Marxist-Leninist ideology as a driving force in contemporary Chinese politics and foreign and domestic policy; and second, the absolute audacity of his political strategy. This includes his preparedness to overturn long-established party conventions, to marginalize or eliminate any real, potential or imagined political or policy opposition long before it could become a real-world threat to his project, and to smash through bureaucratic inertia impeding the realization of his ambitions for himself as paramount leader — and for China becoming the pre-eminent regional and global power by mid-century.

Indeed, Xi is now the embodiment of his new ideological mantra of “the spirit of struggle.”

IDEOLOGICAL CHANGE

Ideology has always mattered to the Chinese Communist Party. But with Xi Jinping, we have seen the return of Ideological Man with his own brand of Marxist-Leninist nationalism. This was clear from Xi’s earliest writings in 2013 which resulted in the reassertion of the Party’s Leninist control of Chinese politics. His Marxist ideological worldview began extending to the economy after the 19th Party Congress in 2017 when he formally redefined the Party’s ideological priorities away from the rip-roaring days of unconstrained “reform and opening” to develop the economy, to a new era dealing with the “imbalances of development” which the Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods had created.

The 20th Party Congress report is more ideological in tone and content than we have seen in congress reports for the last 40 years. The report speaks to the great ideological progress which has been achieved over the previous decade in developing a “new chapter in a modern Marxism for the 20th century.” He enjoins the party to “grasp both the worldview and methodology of Socialism,” and to apply the analytical tools of dialectical and historical materialism to the Party’s understanding of the great challenges of the time. Indeed, this ideological lens should be applied “to advance every aspect of our work” — and in so doing, also develop “a new normal for the civilization of all humankind.”

Chinese Communist Party officials (for whom the work report is intended) are acutely attuned to changes in the ideological phraseology of these core party documents. This goes down to an analysis of basic word counts for particular phrases. For example, the term “Marxism” itself is referred to 26 times in the work report – double the number that we saw in the already ideologized report of 2017. The Marxist-Leninist concept of “struggle” (violent or non-violent), as the means by which to realize domestic or international progress against the Party’s stated objectives, has 22 references in the report — about the same number as in 2017. The Marxist concept of “common prosperity” is also emphasized in equal measure compared to the 2017 document. But Xi Jinping’s overriding nationalist objective of building a powerful state (*qianguo*), together with the term “Marxism” itself, represent the dominant ideological thematics for the 2022 report: there are 32 references to a “powerful state” in 2022, versus 20 such references in 2017.

And just in case Chinese officials were unclear about the significance Xi Jinping attached to this new ideological framework, this was reinforced by the Congress’s formal amendments to the Party constitution. These included the following:

- That “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era is the Marxism of contemporary China and of the 21st century and embodies the best Chinese culture and ethos of the era.”
- That the condition should include “new developments in Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era since the Party’s 19th Congress should also be incorporated into the Party constitution” — including Xi’s “new ideas, new thinking, and new strategies on national defense, the armed forces, the United Front, and foreign affairs.”
- And that the constitution would now reflect “the decisive significance of establishing comrade Xi Jinping’s core position on the Party’s Central Committee and in the Party as a whole, as well as establishing the guiding role of Xi Jinping thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era in order to implement this body of thought in all areas and stages of work for both the Party and the country.”

In other words, ideologically speaking, the Party now has little room to move: ideology is back in force as a concept in its own right; Marxism-Leninism is to be embraced as the fundamental ideological framework of values, of end goals, and importantly as an analytical methodology; and Xi Jinping thought is now the exclusive embodiment of contemporary Chinese Marxism to be applied across the board.

POLITICAL CHANGE

On the pure politics of the 20th Party Congress report, Xi’s work report represents a further elevation of his paramount political status within the party. Xi dedicates a lengthy section of his work report to the party’s achievements over the last decade under his own leadership, which are listed as “the great changes of the new era.” The list is a familiar one. It ranges from the consolidation of the Party’s leadership over all, the confirmation of China’s new middle income status, the evolution of his new development concept as an alternative to Deng’s era of reform and opening, the elimination of poverty, and the proper handling of Covid-19 (albeit without any indication in the document on a future transition from China’s “dynamic zero-Covid approach”). Internationally, it includes the resolution of the Hong Kong problem by placing the Special Administrative Region (SAR) “in the hands of Hong Kong patriots”; the international acceptance of the Belt and Road initiative and dealing effectively with a rolling series of drastic changes in China’s international operating environment. The net impact of these stellar records of achievement is to further elevate Xi’s ideological and political status.

But it is the sheer magnitude of the departure from established conventions that underscores Xi’s political audacity in changing the entire face of modern Chinese politics. First, Xi has defied the previous political convention for China’s national leaders being limited to two five-year terms in order to preserve the principles of collective leadership and to prevent a return to Mao’s practice of life-long tenure. Second, after only five years in office, Xi delivered his own body of ideological “thought” for the “new era,” whereas for previous leaders this came toward the end of their political terms, or in Deng’s case following his death. Third, Xi has also presided over the longest internal party campaign in its hundred year history (the anti-corruption campaign)

which has in part been a mechanism for entrenching political loyalty and control. Finally, for those who have begun watching the party's new 16-part propaganda series on navigating China's future under Xi Jinping, the cult of personality is now back with a vengeance.

Lest there be any doubt, we now live in new political times.

ECONOMIC POLICY CHANGE

On the economy, the central question has been whether development remains the central task of the party or whether that has now been equaled (or even surpassed) by national security. One indication of the shift away from the absolute centrality of the economic growth agenda lies in the number of references to the simple term “the economy” in the text of the 2022 report compared with its predecessors. In the 14th Congress report of 1982, when Deng relaunched his economic agenda of market reform and opening, the term “economy” was referenced 195 times. By the time of Xi's first Congress report in 2017, that number had come down to 70. In this report, “the economy” is referenced on only 60 occasions. By contrast, at the 14th Party Congress in 1992, the term “national security” appeared only once; it was used four times in the 18th Congress in 2012, before rising to 18 references at the 19th Congress in Xi's first Congress in 2017; there are now 27 references in the 20th Congress report.

This declining emphasis on economic development is also reflected in the report's somewhat tepid treatment of the Party's growth objectives for the five years ahead; the CCP now aspires to only “reasonable growth rates,” presumably mindful of the vast array of domestic and international headwinds now bearing down on the Chinese economy.

The qualitative treatment of the Party's economic policy settings in this Congress report also indicates a continuing drift away from market principles back towards the more comfortable disciplines of state direction and control. Whereas the report does make reference to an earlier party mantra of “giving full play to the decisive role of the market in resource application,” this continues to be tempered by parallel reference to the need for “a better role being played by the state.” The same sort of parallelism is evident in the report's treatment of state-owned enterprises and the private sector: the

party is told to “consolidate the public economy” while simultaneously “encouraging the non-public economy.”

The report speaks of the need for “national self-reliance” in science and technology, the “strategic” allocation of resources for the development of new technologies (rather than sharing that remit with China's dynamic, privately-owned tech sector). The party is also directed to undertake the strategic deployment of human capital, rather than talent being allocated according to the competitive opportunities of the market. There are numerous references to China's new mercantilism as reflected in the impenetrable dogma of the “dual-circulation economy” whereby China's future growth drivers are seen to be largely domestic, although net exports are still encouraged in order to increase foreign dependency on the Chinese market. This is reinforced by a call to “increase the security and resilience of China's own industrial supply chains” in anticipation of future national security challenges. Moreover, all of this is compatible with Xi's embrace in his Congress report of a “high level of opening to the outside world” in contrast to the unconditional formulations used during the Deng period on the centrality of “reform and opening,” long seen as being central to China's growth performance in the past.

This statist emphasis on China's unfolding economic model is tempered by a limited number of more reformist concepts. For example, there is a new call to increase total factor productivity across the economy although little indication is given as to how this might be achieved in practice. Similarly, there is an indication that China will reduce the exclusion list for the categories of permissible inbound foreign direct investment for the future. Just as there are references to China's desire to bring about “the increased internationalizing of the renminbi” — although this would appear to be part of a more general strategy to reduce China's future international dependency on global financial markets which continue to be denominated in US dollars. China is mindful of the consequences of financial sanctions applied against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine — and what that might imply for any future Chinese military action over Taiwan. Nonetheless, whatever pro-market signals might be contained within these measures, they are qualified by Xi's new, overriding ideological narrative of “a Chinese style of

modernization.” This is a direct critique of Western, neoliberal globalization. It also reflects Xi’s embrace of what is now termed the “correct direction of globalization” for the future.

In summary, Xi has upended Deng’s 35-year old growth model on ideological grounds by formally adjusting the party’s “principal contradiction” to deal with the many “imbalances” left over from the period of “reform and opening”. Xi has presided over a “new development concept” whose essential components are the revitalization of state-owned enterprises and large-scale industrial policy; new restrictions on the private sector; together with a political assault on the tech, property, and private education industries. This has been matched with a new mercantilist approach to international economic policy anchored in his doctrine of the “dual circulation economy,” national self-sufficiency, and re-securing China’s own global supply lines in response to what Xi has concluded to be a U.S. strategy of systematic decoupling.

I see no evidence in his 20th Party Congress report that Xi is moving away from his increasingly statist development model and back toward the market, the private sector or to more open international economic engagement.

FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY CHANGE

As for foreign and security policy, the same level of iconoclasm toward sacred nostrums from the past has also been on display. We have become familiar with Xi’s early abandonment of Deng’s cautious approach of “hide your strength, bide your time, never take the lead” in favor of a new strategy of “striving for achievement,” whereby China now seeks to change the regional and global status quo in a direction more compatible with Chinese national interests and values.

Xi has doubled down on this approach in his most recent congress report. In fact Xi, takes this further by indicating that national security (in dealing with threats both at home and abroad) rather than the economy should be China’s central preoccupation for the coming period.

The most disturbing component of the 20th Party Congress report, however, lies in its formal analysis of China’s rapidly evolving external strategic environment. In previous Party Congress reports back to the 1990s, there has been a standard

reference to “peace and development” as the major, underlying trend of our times. Indeed, a benign external environment had long been seen by Deng and his successors as the analytical underpinnings for China focusing exclusively on its economic development imperative. This formulation was complimented by another standard phrase in Congress reports since 2002 that China was “experiencing a period of strategic opportunity” (*zhanlue jiyuqi*). Critical to this analysis is that neither of these standard expressions feature in the 20th Congress report.

The analytical and policy implications of this conclusion are clear. The party no longer rules out the possibility of major war in the future. As a result, the party’s security agenda now rivals and perhaps surpasses the central priority attached to its economic agenda over the previous 40 years. This conclusion is reinforced by a new set of formulations that lace the document’s analysis of China’s rapidly deteriorating external environment. Xi now describes a “severe and complex international situation” where the party must be “prepared for dangers in peacetime” as well as “preparing for the storm.” In doing so, Xi once again calls on the Party to continue to adhere to “the spirit of struggle.” And in all of this, Xi refers to the next five years as “critical” for the continued building of a powerful Chinese nation. The Congress report goes on to refer to “national security” as the “foundation of national rejuvenation.”

Xi also uses the Congress report to entrench earlier statements he has made on the need for “a total security agenda” incorporating ideological security, political security, economic security, and strategic security. The report then directs the party to apply this concept of “comprehensive security” across the full spectrum of the Party’s internal processes.

As for the PLA, Xi calls for “an increased capacity for the army to win”; an “increased proportion of new combat forces”; and for the promotion of “actual combat training for the military.” Importantly, however, the Congress report’s language on Taiwan is relatively conciliatory: Xi emphasizes the Party’s preference is to resolve the Taiwan issue peacefully, while not renouncing the use of force. This is not a new formulation. What is new, however, is Xi’s warning that its harsher measures over Taiwan are targeted not at the bulk of the Taiwan-

ese population, but instead at the small minority of Taiwan independence supporters and those foreign states (i.e., the U.S.) that back them. Xi nonetheless reminds his Taiwanese audience that on the broader question on reunification, the “wheels of history” are still grinding forward towards the “inevitability of reunification.”

In summary, on the external strategic environment, PLA preparedness and less starkly on Taiwan, Xi Jinping is nonetheless signaling to the system that national security preparedness is now the order of the day.

PERSONNEL CHANGES TO THE POLITBURO STANDING COMMITTEE

But it is on the dramatic personnel changes to the Standing Committee of the Politburo that Xi Jinping has arguably been his most audacious. Until this Congress, Deng, Jiang, Hu, and Xi have generally adhered to an informal convention that the final composition of the Standing Committee (and other senior party organs) should reflect a broad balance of factional and policy interests as well as the complex web of family and loyalty networks among the party’s political elites. Indeed, this has been seen as a necessary ingredient for long-term political stability after the implosion of elite politics that gave rise to the chaos of the decade-long Cultural Revolution.

In recent times, this involved a complex balancing act between the party’s economic reform faction and a conservative group of old-style state planners who fought each step of the reform process until compromises were made on the way through. The former also included the so-called “Communist Youth League” (CYL) faction that emerged under the political patronage of then Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, and then traced its lineage through Xi’s predecessor Hu Jintao, current Premier Li Keqiang, and Vice Premiers Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua. Completing this complex factional milieu are the personal loyalty networks surrounding, on the one hand, the 96-year-old Jiang Zemin, his previous organizational enforcer Zeng Qinghong, and what has loosely been called “the Jiang Faction” — and on the other hand Xi Jinping himself and the so-called Zhejiang, Fujian, Shanghai, and Shaanxi Factions, each made up of political subordinates who have worked with Xi during his extensive provincial careers.

In the previous seven-man Standing Committee appointed by the 19th Congress, the CYL group were represented by Li Keqiang (67) and Wang Yang (also 67), with Hu Chunhua (a mere 59) as a member of the wider politburo and ready for promotion to the party’s inner cabinet.

What is shocking for analysts of Chinese elite politics and students of Chinese political economy is Xi’s “winner-take-all” decision to remove all three from the senior echelons of the party and state. The unofficial age rule for China’s senior leaders for some decades has been “if you’re under 67 at the time of the Congress you can stay on, but if you’re 68 or over you retire.” Xi, himself at 69, of course stands unconstrained by this convention — but this was expected because of the earlier abolition of the two-term limit. But to remove all three CYL candidates, all of whom were within the age limit, and none of whom had evidenced any real political disloyalty to Xi, is deeply surprising.

It indicates two things: first that long-standing personal loyalty to Xi is now the essential criterion for membership of the senior echelons of the party; and second, that Xi is not concerned about the impact of these decisions on international or domestic market confidence.

It is therefore unsurprising that those now filling the four vacancies on the Politburo Standing Committee (apart from Li Zhanshu and Han Zheng, two others retired because of the age limit) are all Xi Jinping loyalists. Li Qiang, the new Premier, and now number two in the Standing Committee hierarchy, is Xi’s former Chief of Staff from his days presiding over the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee. Despite Xi’s recent controversial assignment as Shanghai Party Secretary during that city’s brutal Covid lockdown, in Xi’s eyes that seems to have been a further reason to promote him to the top rather than the reverse. Second, Cai Qi, who will now run the party’s Central Secretariat, is also a Xi loyalist from even earlier in Xi’s political career, when they served together in Fujian — Xi having subsequently promoted him to the General Office of the newly-formed National Security Commission and then to Beijing Municipal Party Secretary. Third, Ding Xuexiang, who now becomes Executive Vice Premier, was responsible for the General Office of the Shanghai Party Committee during the period when Xi was Shanghai Party Secretary, and is who Xi later appointed as his own Chief

of Staff after 2017. Finally, Li Xi, who takes on the party's Central Discipline Inspection Commission, which is responsible for the party's ongoing anti-corruption campaign, also has strong personal ties with Xi Jinping's family going back to the 1980s and even earlier, through Xi's father Xi Zhongxun.

In many respects, senior personnel appointments matter less now than after previous Party Congresses. That's because Xi has in effect become the "Chairman of Everything," with a myriad of policy commissions and leading groups answering into him across the entire spectrum of the party's and state's overall machinery of government. But the premium Xi has attached to absolute political loyalty and policy reliability for the next five years is remarkable. This will impact the quality of the internal debate, particularly on the economy, when the traditional reformist faction no longer has a political champion at the center. Moreover, the center of gravity of the new Standing Committee seven seems more broadly to err in the direction of the party's new national security agenda rather than the long-standing economic development imperative from times past.

Indeed, across ideology, politics, policy, and now personnel, Xi Jinping's new era is well and truly upon us.

Lest there be any doubt on the above, the *People's Daily* official campaign on "The Five Firm Grasps" (*wuge laolao bawo*) that has accompanied the Party Congress makes Xi Jinping's future direction abundantly clear:

- Firmly grasp the major significance of the work of the past 5 years and the great transformation of the 10 years of the New Era (要牢牢把握过去5年工作和新时代10年伟大变革的重大意义)
- Firmly grasp the world view and methodology of the Thought of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era (牢牢把握新时代中国特色社会主义思想的世界观和方法论)

- Firmly grasp the mission and task of promoting the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people through Chinese-style modernization (牢牢把握以中国式现代化推进中华民族伟大复兴的使命任务)
- Firmly grasp the important demand of leading a great social revolution through a great self-revolution (牢牢把握以伟大自我革命引领伟大社会革命的重要要求)

These are profound changes compared with the China of the relatively recent past. They are in large part the product of a truly formidable politician whose signature audacity we have seen at work across these multiple changes on the home front. And it is more likely than not that we will now see more of this same characteristic audacity increasingly applied to China's rapidly changing posture, policies, and actions on the external front.

We may never know what was on Hu Jintao's mind when the world saw him being unceremoniously escorted from the main conference room of the Great Hall of the People during the closing ceremony of the 20th Party Congress. He has long been rumored to be suffering from some form of urological condition, although he managed to sit through the opening session of the Party Congress without apparent difficulty. The fact that his son was also a delegate to the Party Congress would seem to suggest there has not been a fundamental rift between Xi and the Hu families. But, if you could imagine yourself as Hu (and I remember him well as a young Communist Youth League Secretary visiting Australia in 1984 when I was a junior Embassy official and later as prime minister), observing the world that you not long ago presided over now being turned upside down in front of your own eyes, this would have been a deeply unsettling experience.

Xi Jinping's China is now a China of fast-moving and increasingly radical change. And we should not assume that what we have seen over the last decade represents the end of it. It may only be the beginning.

