

The 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China and Its Aftermath

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ABSTRACT The recently concluded 19th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) brought the world's attention to the future direction of the CPC. As the proceedings of the Party Congress revealed, sustaining the legitimacy of the CPC's hold on power is an overriding concern for the country's political leaders. The Party Congress addressed the corruption plaguing the CPC and the Chinese state writ large, which has deep, long-term consequences for the Party's capacity to rule. On the other hand, it also displayed the dynamism of the CPC in the form of its resilience, adaptability and discipline.

INTRODUCTION

As the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) completed its 19th Party Congress in October 2017, there is every indication that the CPC's grip on power is likely to remain steadfast in the near future. The recently concluded Party Congress only cemented the power of China's ruling elites under Xi Jinping. The CPC's Party congresses are highly scripted events and, in general, do not serve as venues for making decisions; rather, the Party merely acquiesces to pre-determined issues during the course of the event.

The Congress lays down the Party's guidelines for the conduct of governmental policy over the succeeding five years.¹ In the case of the 19th Party Congress, most of the crucial policy decisions—among them, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Central Military Commission (CMC) higher defence organisation reforms—had already been taken during the preceding five years. The once-in-a-decade leadership transition, and the Party Congress held twice

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in a decade, are an important event for taking stock and consolidating existing policies rather than announcing new schemes or policies. In some respects, the 19th Party Congress was no exception to previous congresses. It was a continuation of the CPC's brand of leadership: to demonstrate the successes of the previous five years and articulate a vision for the future, including an insistence on maintaining Party line discipline; and appointing officials to a new Central Committee. The latter is the basis for a new Politburo and, consequently, the apex Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) that will guide governance for the following five years.²

The following analysis addresses some core issues that undergird the Party Congress and the extent to which it shores up the legitimacy of the CPC. Legitimacy can flow from multiple sources: economic performance, institutional adaptation and innovation, ideological affinity, nationalism, an emphasis on indigenous cultural values and China's place in the world. This brief situates and analyses the relative significance of these factors that burnish the legitimacy of the CPC and how the 19th Party Congress sought to address them. Many commentators, particularly in the West tend to think that the China model, which combines political authoritarianism with economic openness, is unsustainable,³ but as the succeeding analysis will reveal it is a lot more complex. The outcome of the 19th Congress only reinforced the fact that China's ruling elites are capable of sustaining governing power, despite the contradictions inherent in the 'One Country, Two Systems' model and the factionalism that afflicts the CPC. Undoubtedly, several challenges remain for the CPC's governing authority. Corruption is one such phenomenon that the Xi Jinping-

led Chinese leadership is determined to address, and for which it has taken numerous steps.

In the context of the 19th Party Congress, this brief first surveys the role of economic growth in legitimating the authority of the CPC. It then evaluates the importance of institutional adaptation and culture of the CPC to governing a transforming society. Finally, it evaluates the role of the Communist Party's control over the military and direction of the military reforms – a crucial factor for countries neighbouring China and beyond.

The analysis seeks to give the reader context about the core themes listed above by drawing on both open-source material and Indian assessments of what meaning the 19th Party Congress holds for the future of the CPC and its capacity for governance for at least the next five years.

THE 19TH CONGRESS AND THE ECONOMY

In his inaugural address to the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping drew attention to China's economic performance as the basis for China's emergence as a great power. Despite a sluggish global economy, China fared well and entered what Xi called a "new normal in economic development" with medium-paced growth, if not the frenetic growth rates that the People's Republic of China (PRC) had experienced in the past.⁴ Xi expects to see China eliminate poverty by 2020.⁵ Indeed, economic performance has been a legitimating cornerstone of the CPC's capacity to maintain uncontested power.

Eudaemonic legitimacy is that which is determined by economic performance and necessitates the efficient delivery of economic

goods and services to the people.⁶ Unlike in democracies, poor economic performance can result in the de-legitimisation of authoritarian regimes.⁷ The CPC-led Chinese state has been particularly adept and disciplined in maintaining high economic growth rates, preventing any upsurge of popular discontent among the Chinese people for most of the post-Mao period. It may be said, in fact, that eudaemonic legitimacy is a uniquely post-Mao phenomenon. While the Mao era witnessed legitimisation of rule through the cult of Mao's persona in combination with ideological and revolutionary fervour,⁸ the reform period that followed displayed the economic dynamism legitimating the Chinese state under the CPC.

China has gone through three phases of revolution, development and reform.⁹ These three phases roughly correspond with Harry Harding's classification of Revolutionary Maoism, Restorationism and Reform.¹⁰ Reformers have been the most dominant in the post-Mao period, with restorationists only enjoying a brief period of dominance following Mao's death in 1976. The restorationists sought to pare down Maoism with its fixation on mass mobilisation, ideological fervour and personality-based leadership by restoring the party's collective leadership.¹¹ The reformers, however, substantively rejected the core of Maoism's closed-door economic policies, while retaining the restorationist plank on collective leadership and fidelity to the Party.¹²

The development and reform period, starting in 1979 under Deng Xiaoping, was sustained by Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and continues apace under Xi Jinping.¹³ Splits did

emerge in the CPC leadership over Bo Xilai, leader of the mega-city of Chongqing. The Chongqing model of development was seen as an effort to revive the Maoist pattern of development. Its rival model of development was Guangdong, representing Dengism. Maoism and Dengism, in many respects, are irreconcilable. This fundamental rupture explains in good measure, if not completely, the anti-corruption drive against Bo and Party officials from Chongqing. The high-profile officials purged during the anti-corruption drive were mostly from the City of Chongqing whose Chief until March 2012 was the neo-Maoist Bo Xilai. Some do conclude that Bo's elimination was as much about corruption as it was the result of infighting over the Maoist pattern of development as opposed to the Dengist variant.¹⁴ Bo was a one-time rival and competitor to Xi, and it remains debatable whether he was a Maoist ideologue or was playing to mobilise popular support to secure a place in the PBSC and potentially reach the helm of the Chinese presidency.¹⁵

Despite slower economic growth over the last four years, the CPC-led Chinese state has not experienced serious loss of support from the public. This only invites the question: If economic performance is not all that explains the CPC's grip on power, what other factors play in sustaining regime legitimacy? Key determinants are the institutions, as well as the role of culture. Indeed, the institutionalist and the cultural school would argue that eudaemonic legitimacy is also in part the direct outcome of the CPC's institutional adaptation and the cultural attributes that are inherent in Chinese society.

THE 19TH CONGRESS AND THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

Regimes sustain themselves by justifying to their people that existing political institutions are the best and any alternative would result in turmoil, instability and uncertainty. As Xi noted in his speech, “As history has shown and will continue to bear witness to, without the leadership of the Communist Party of China, national rejuvenation would be just wishful thinking.”¹⁶ Implying the institutional dynamism of the CPC in adapting and managing the shifting realities of the economy, aspirations of the Chinese people and society writ large is without precedent. This has found empirical support among some scholars and analysts, including “democracy theorists” such as Andrew J. Nathan. In the context of institutional adaptation and resilience of the CPC, the most critical attributes are norm-determined succession politics; second, meritocracy to promote political elites rather than factional favouritism. Thirdly, the “differentiation and functional specialization of institutions within the regime”.¹⁷ Finally, the establishment of strong institutions to ensure political involvement that ensures positive gains for the legitimacy of the CPC.¹⁸ “Intra-Party” democracy or Marxist-Leninist Democratic Centralism whereby a degree of internal deliberation and consultation does take place. This was particularly true during the decade-long tenure of Hu Jintao, during which all the members of PBSC, the apex decision-making of the Chinese government, held equal power within their designated portfolios.¹⁹

Thus, for the institutionalists, eudaemonic legitimacy cannot sufficiently explain the CPC’s resilience. The PRC regime’s authoritarian resilience derives not simply

from a substitution of economic performance to undergird its legitimacy; it is equally a function of the CPC’s institutional adaptation. As Eric Li accurately observed following the ascension of Xi Jinping, “Beijing will be able to meet the country’s ills with dynamism and resilience, thanks to the CCP’s adaptability, system of meritocracy, and legitimacy with the Chinese people.”²⁰ The 19th Party Congress not only addressed economic realities that China will face in the coming years, but the necessity to strengthen institutions. Xi’s speech underlined that the governing capacity of the CPC cannot be undermined. He laid frequent and strong emphasis on law-based governance, making clear the Party’s “mass line” under the centralised leadership of the Central Committee, including strict adherence to the “Party Constitution”, “Party regulations”, party “policies” and “standards” as inviolable. In relation to corruption, he expounded the importance of observing the “Three Stricts and Three Earnests”. The “Three Stricts” are 1) strictness in practicing self-cultivation for every individual; 2) strictness in exercising power; and 3) strict observance of self-discipline. The “Three Stricts” roughly correspond to the “Three Earnests” which include 1) individual thinking or thought; 2) work culture; and 3) behaviour or conduct.²¹

This is as much a by-product of culture. Chinese society and culture are strongly influenced by the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius. The Confucian culture of the Middle Kingdom is unique. Confucianism’s predicates can be divided into two types of values: social and political. The first mandates “social collectivism” and is fundamentally rooted in norms and practices of interpersonal

relations that cover filial attributes such as love and obedience within the family, deference to authority, and communitarian primacy over individual liberties.²² The second type of Confucianism is predicated on “political collectivism” in that it is paternalistic, encompassing the “norms and practices of government”. Government in this instance is responsible for moral or ethical guidance, it is benevolent and ensures social harmony by obviating “anti-adversarial” attitudes, and cements consensual governance.²³

Indeed, Xi’s allusion to the “mass line” is consistent with Mao’s “mass line”, which can be defined as “inclusiveness, equality, and reciprocal influence between people and political elites.”²⁴ At one level, the “mass line” is not distinctly Maoist; it harks back to Confucian notion of *Minben* (people-centric).²⁵ This ideal demonstrates that elites express people’s voices and serve them. Historically and culturally, a deep moral linkage permeated the relationship between the state and society in China.²⁶ Consequently, these native, yet enduring Chinese cultural and sociological traits are vital in sustaining the CPC’s legitimacy,²⁷ and are reinforced in Xi’s speech.²⁸ As Xi observed, “We, the Chinese people, have greater confidence in our own culture.... There is greater unity in thinking both within the Party and throughout society.”²⁹ Xi’s speech echoed Yun-Han Chu’s observation, “It is [in China] desirable to have an omnipotent government that bears all-compassing responsibility for the people’s well-being, not just materialist well-being but their ethical and intellectual development as well.”³⁰

However, there is a downside to Chinese culture as well, which poses risks to the CPC’s legitimacy. For instance, the practice of

Guanxi, which breeds corruption, is deeply rooted within Chinese society.³¹ There are three variants of Guanxi - family Guanxi, helper Guanxi, and business Guanxi.³² The first variant is the most benign and even deemed ethical—it is an extension of a favour by one individual to another, mostly familial, without any mandatory reciprocity.³³ The second type of Guanxi or business Guanxi is more nuanced. In its most beneficial form it could reduce transaction costs and bring efficiency, for instance, in the execution of a business deal. However, it is problematic if a transaction between two individuals or contracting entities adversely affects third parties.³⁴ The third variant Guanxi is the most pernicious. Corruption-based Guanxi is endemic within Chinese society. It also involves a corrupt nexus between business and Party members or government officials and known in the PRC as “*qianquan jiaoyi*” or “venal Guanxi.”³⁵ It involves nepotism, favouritism, cronyism and bribery.

Xi’s October 2017 address was extremely scathing about the corruption plaguing the Party, compelling the Xi-led CPC’s ongoing anti-corruption drive spearheaded by Wang Qishan. Wang, as the all-powerful anti-corruption Tsar, has been indispensable to Xi’s consolidation of power. Under the Party’s term and age limits, anyone over 68 years cannot serve in the PBSC; Wang is 69. Nevertheless, reflecting a recognition of his efforts against graft and his loyalty to Xi, Wang could potentially be elevated to the vice-presidency of the PRC at the next National People’s Congress (NPC) in March 2018.³⁶ The NPC is a mere rubberstamp for decisions already made by the PBSC. Wang’s elevation and role as vice-president may be purely ceremonial, but it

allows Xi to cement his supremacy with the help of a confidante and ensures the proximity and presence within the PBSC of a trusted ally without breaching the Party's informal rules on age and term limits. If Xi were to ignore age and term restrictions, albeit unwritten, he risks antagonising other factions within the Party and provincial satraps.³⁷ Limits on age and official tenures are a by-product of Deng Xiaoping's legacy, even if Deng himself never consistently followed it and have become rigidly entrenched within the Party system.³⁸ Therefore, the institutionalisation of collective leadership means it is still speculative to conclude whether Xi Jinping would extend his own tenure beyond 2022, when the 20th Party Congress convenes and the new CPC General Secretary is selected (or rather anointed).

Nevertheless, there is a view that Xi, without reviving Mao's revolutionary and ideological fervour seeks to consolidate power that extends beyond 2022, when his current term ends. This would potentially emulate Mao's belief in charismatic political leadership for stability, unity and orderly change for the PRC. A practice has been in place at least since the reign of Jiang Zemin for two decades, wherein at the start of the second term of the Chinese president, the CPC nominates his successor, which normally occurs during the Party Congress. This was conspicuously absent at the 19th Party Congress, evoking speculation that Xi intends to prolong his reign.³⁹ In a further departure, Xi has retired senior members of the PBSC consistent with unwritten Party regulations, but avoided confirming and replacing them with younger cadres on the PBSC, which still leaves open the possibility for younger successors to emerge. At the same time, it also creates opportunities

for Xi to consolidate power for decades like Mao and Deng. He has also limited the composition of PBSC to seven members.⁴⁰

Reinforcing this fact is that he has given himself the unique distinction following Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping of having his thought titled, "Xi Jinping Thought of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era", inserted in the Chinese Constitution while still President of the PRC.⁴¹ While Xi may have emerged as the ostensible supremo of the CPC and the PRC, it is possible that this supremacy is transient given the multiple factions within the CPC, regional disparities, income and wealth inequality, including a potent and vocal Maoist faction that Bo ostensibly represented. Indeed, some argue that managing fractiousness within the Party means he does have to perform a delicate balancing act.⁴² It is noteworthy that Xi's speech acknowledged the legacies of all the leading lights who controlled the CPC for a sustained period and whose visions are enshrined in the Chinese Constitution, such as "Mao Zedong Thought", "Deng Xiaoping Theory", "The Three Represents of Jiang Zemin", and "The Scientific Outlook and Harmonious Society of Hu Jintao".⁴³ This contrasted with his immediate predecessor Hu Jintao's speech to the 17th Party Congress in October 2007. Hu acknowledged Mao's contribution in establishing the PRC, but was scathing in his criticism of Mao Zedong Thought, particularly what he referred to as its disastrous role in contributing to the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976. Hu recognised the enormously beneficial legacy of "Deng Xiaoping Theory" for repudiating "Mao Zedong Thought" in theory and practice for "taking class struggle as the key link".⁴⁴

Second-generation leaders such as Deng were far more consequential for Hu in setting China on the course to reform and openness, paving the way for third-generation leaders like Jiang Zemin and fourth-generation leaders like himself.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Wang's anti-graft drive, blessed by Xi, is the most extensive and sweeping yet under any Chinese leader. The party acknowledges, after all, that corruption risks corroding their legitimacy.⁴⁶ Wang's successor as the Chief or Secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), the principal agency overseeing and implementing the anti-graft programme is Zhao Leji,⁴⁷ drawn from the same Shaanxi region from which Xi Jinping hails.⁴⁸ Zhao is a product of the Central Party School (CPS) in Beijing, where he studied politics from 2002 to 2005.⁴⁹ The CPS is responsible for training the Party's mid-career cadres in the ideology of Marxist-Leninism, the mechanisms for intra-party control, adherence to the Party Constitution, administration, management, leadership, including coursework in economics, accounting, history, philosophy and international relations.⁵⁰ The CPS serves as the brains trust of the CPC government. It is a source of ideas for governance, policy formulation and administration, and provides the conceptual basis for the practical implementation of new schemes and policy initiatives.⁵¹

To be sure, Guanxi alone does not explain corruption in China. The absence of the rule of law, the deluge of money in the economy, and increased possibilities for siphoning cash also explain endemic graft within the PRC.⁵² Corruption is also a problem that has afflicted

the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the CCDI plays an important role in enforcing anti-graft strictures against the Chinese military.

THE 19TH CONGRESS AND THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

One of the most crucial elements of Xi's speech of October 2017 was its focus on the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The PLA is a powerful institution, and ensuring its loyalty and obedience to the Party is a foremost concern for any Chinese leader. The 19th Party Congress also elected a new Central Military Commission which has now been restructured and reduced in size.

Shortly after the 19th Party Congress, Xi summoned the CMC on the 26th, underlining the importance he attaches to obedience, borne as much out of insecurity and weakness as toughness.⁵³ In attendance were the Defence Minister, heads of military institutions and academies, and Research and Development (R&D) experts. Xi reiterated what he already emphasised in the report to the 19th Party Congress: absolute fidelity to the Party and Chairman of the CMC and make qualitative improvements in combat and operational performance through "jointmanship" of the PLA and its allied services.⁵⁴ While Xi's speech emphasised the comprehensive writ of the Party over all branches of the Chinese military and the People's Armed Police (PAP), domestically in China, there is debate about whether the PLA should be a national fighting force or the Party's military.⁵⁵ The CPC has no doubts over insisting that Party loyalty is fundamental to the PLA.⁵⁶

Under Xi Jinping, the PLA has undergone visible changes. First, the structural organisation of the PLA been transformed. The reforms thrust down the PLA in 2015 to ensure it became a multi-service fighting force were the result of the top-down leadership of the CPC. In contrast to the erstwhile Soviet military, China's military regions are dissolved and joint theatre commands are being established. To be sure, Hu Jintao laid the basis for Xi's ongoing initiatives as early as in 2004 by ordering the PLA to develop as an integrated fighting force after Hu took over the chair of the CMC from Jiang Zemin.⁵⁷ Instantly, the PLA introduced mock exercises in the Shenyang and Beijing military regions to test its capacity for joint operations.⁵⁸ Subsequently, the 17th Party Congress in 2007 endorsed the change in China's military posture and by 2009; the entire Chinese military was subject to this change.⁵⁹

Xi is at the apex of the Central Military Commission (CMC), which earlier had 11 members and now seven, as Chairman and Commander in Chief (CiC), followed by two vice-chairs at the next level, the hawkish Air Force General Xu Qiliang and former CMC Equipment Development Department (EDD) Chief Zhang Youxia.⁶⁰ Generals Xu and Zhang are Xi loyalists and filling the CMC with such figures enables Xi to execute his ambitious military reforms for which obedience is highly prized and indispensable. On the next rung are four members as missile force commander Wei Fenghe, Chief of Joint Staff General Li Zuocheng, Director Political Department, Miao Hua and anti-corruption chief within the military, Zhang Shengmin.⁶¹ Significantly, these CMC military members represent a strong joint background. Under these former

service chiefs are an assortment of department heads, specifically the Joint Staff Department (JSD) and service chiefs and theatre commanders.⁶² The CMC is historically dominated by ground force officers. The entry of a new Naval officer, along with the appointment of a Navy man to head the Southern Theatre command means that Xi's massive reshuffle and overhaul is beginning to change the profile of the force. One of the other decisive and consequential reform moves by Xi in 2015 was the break-up of the potent General Staff Department (GSD).⁶³ He initiated disciplinary and interrogatory proceedings against top generals for corruption under the CCDI. The first high-ranking military official to be purged was Xu Caihou, a one-time vice-chairman of the CMC who was expelled from the Party in 2014 for spearheading the "cash for ranks" scheme, and thereafter arrested and convicted for life. The next on the line was Guo Boxiong, who was "purged" for almost the same charges as Xu.⁶⁴ Several other senior, mid-level and lower-echelon officers have also been eliminated.⁶⁵

Historically, the logistics branch of the PLA, the erstwhile General Logistics Department (GLD) has been the most critically damaged by kickbacks. The possibilities for graft are highly contained under its successor the Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF) and its sub-units within the five emerging joint "theatre commands".⁶⁶ This is in line with Xi's commitment to converting the PLA into a world-class fighting force that can "...obey the Party's command, fight and win [wars], and maintain excellent conduct."⁶⁷ The brutal crackdown against corruption is reminiscent of the purges under Mao; no other leader since then has targeted the military of nearly all

ranks.⁶⁸ In the past, particularly the period after Mao's reign, until Xi, public officials engaged in corruption were eased out of the Party through quiet retirement, rather than jail time.⁶⁹ Neither Deng nor his successors Jiang and Hu had resorted to the purges being witnessed today.⁷⁰ These purges, however cruel they might be, are necessary if Xi's vision for the PLA and its ancillary arms are to be realised to become a highly disciplined, "world-class" integrated fighting force.⁷¹

On the technological front, Xi has made it clear that there needs to be greater civil-military integration. Civil-military integration in the Chinese context means that technology must flow from the military to the civilian domain.⁷² Military technologies can also be commercialised and subject to civilian applications. Xi also emphasised that technology ought to be transferred from the civilian domain to the military sector. These technological exchanges also enable greater and dynamic synergies between the military and civilian sectors in the areas of Artificial Intelligence (AI), aerospace, cyberspace, and transportation.⁷³

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the current anti-graft drive, which in any case is as much a politically motivated purge as it is a sincere and earnest crackdown against corruption, the

institutional and cultural resilience of the CPC will remain intact for many years to come. Xi could retain the Chairmanship of the CMC for a brief period after the 20th Congress in 2022 much as Jiang Zemin retained the Chairmanship of the CMC until 2004 following Hu Jintao's ascension in 2002, while relinquishing his hold over the CMC to his successor in 2024.

Consequently, various analysts and scholars have inferred from these moves that Xi intends to sustain his reign beyond his current tenure and become "supreme" leader of the PRC. However, this is still hypothetical. Notwithstanding the degree of power Xi has concentrated in himself, it is premature to conclude that collectivised rule is on the cusp of a demise with Xi at the helm. While Xi may have resorted to Maoist tactics in purging opponents and using the anti-corruption drive to cement his power, his intention could equally be to leave behind a legacy as two of his immediate predecessors did, rather than emulating the "great helmsman" Mao Zedong to rule until death.

It has not been easy, at least since Deng Xiaoping, to remain paramount leader of China, let alone become an all-powerful leader like Mao Zedong for an extended tenure that breaches the Party's succession rules. There are many young and ambitious leaders within the CPC waiting in the wings to assume the mantle of power. [ORF](#)

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