

Chinese Communist Party congress meets amid gathering crises

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) national congress, due to begin tomorrow, will seek to consolidate the position of President Xi Jinping as China's pre-eminent leader for the next five years, and possibly beyond.

Despite concerted efforts to project the image of a stable, unified leadership, the promotion and glorification of Xi signals the opposite. He is being elevated to the status of supreme leader in a bid to contain factional infighting as the regime confronts a slowing economy and rising social tensions at home, and the growing US threat of trade war and war abroad.

Xi was elevated to CCP chairman in November 2012 and took over the post of Chinese president in March 2013, as part of the once-in-a-decade generational change that has now become the convention. His installation was accompanied by the ousting and trial of potential rival Bo Xilai, party boss in the major city of Chongqing, on trumped-up corruption charges.

Over the past five years, Xi has carried out a widespread anti-corruption drive that, above all, has been aimed at purging potential rivals and silencing opposition to his policies. In July, Sung Zhengcai, who was regarded as a contender for a top leadership role in five years' time, was removed as Chongqing party secretary and could face corruption charges.

After a plenary meeting of the party's central committee last week, the CCP announced that 12 central committee members, including Sung, had been expelled from the party. In all, some 40 members or alternate members of the central committee have been punished for alleged corruption over the past five years. As of 2016, an estimated one million party members had been investigated.

The corruption drive has been one means Xi has used to concentrate power in his hands. He also has carried

out an extensive restructuring of the military or People's Liberation Army (PLA) and consolidated control in the Central Military Commission that he chairs, rather than regional commands. In March 2017, the state-owned news agency Xinhua reported that a total of 4,885 PLA officers had been punished for graft, including a number of top generals.

Xi has tightened his grip over the party and the military as the regime confronts a growing economic and social crisis. The economy has slowed markedly to a projected 6.5 percent growth rate this year and is burdened by high levels of debt. The regime is under pressure from international finance to slash debt, implement austerity measures and further open up the economy to foreign investors. Last month, the international credit rating agency Standard & Poor's downgraded China's sovereign debt rating for the first time in 18 years.

The ousting of Bo Xilai five years ago was a repudiation of the politics he advocated—the protection and boosting of state-owned enterprises as national champions that could compete internationally, along with a more concerted push-back against US efforts to undermine and contain China, if need be through war.

However, while Xi and Premier Li Leqiang have pursued the pro-market agenda demanded by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, they have done so cautiously, fearing that rising unemployment would lead to widespread social unrest. An estimated 5 to 6 million workers are losing their jobs as the government seeks to restructure or shut down so-called zombie state-owned enterprises—those kept solvent by state bank loans—in the steel and coal industries.

While no official figures have been released, the annual number of protests and strikes by workers has reportedly increased by 30 percent over the 2010 figure

of 210,000. The widening gulf between rich and poor is also fueling hostility and alienation from the CCP leadership, which represents the interests of the super-wealthy layer of billionaires that have profited from capitalist restoration since 1978.

Despite government claims that poverty is lessening, social inequality is glaring. According to the National People's Congress (NPC) in March 2017, one third of China's wealth is owned by the top 1 percent of households. Several of the country's wealthiest individuals on the Hurun Rich List will be delegates to the CCP congress.

As the internal and external problems besetting the Chinese leadership have intensified, Xi has been more and more promoted as the country's saviour. Last October, he was designated the regime's "core" leader—a phrase now ritually used in reference to his role. He has strengthened his grip over virtually every aspect of policy, including the economy that traditionally came within the premier's sphere, by establishing and controlling key leading groups.

Xi also has strenuously promoted Chinese nationalism. His so-called Chinese Dream is for the country to rid itself of the legacy of 19th century domination by the major powers and become a major power in its own right. According to some analysts, Xi may try to elevate his status by formally elaborating so-called Xi Jinping Thought and even using the congress to insert a reference to it in the country's constitution.

The congress takes place under the US threat of all-out war against North Korea, a formal ally of China. Xi has bent over backwards to accommodate Washington and the new Trump administration, including by imposing harsh trade sanctions on Pyongyang. However, the Chinese leadership is well aware that a war against North Korea also would be aimed against China, which the US regards as the key obstacle to its global hegemony.

Xi has promoted the One-Belt, One-Road initiative—a massive infrastructure project aimed at linking Europe and Asia via high-speed rail, road and sea, and implicitly sidelining the United States. The project is already exacerbating tensions with Washington, which under Trump is threatening to take trade war measures to undercut China's rising economic influence.

The CCP congress will be pored over by mainstream analysts for clues as to the leadership line-up. Five of

the seven positions on the top Politburo Standing Committee could be filled by new appointees, along with 11 of the wider Politburo's 25 seats and about half the posts on the 205-member central committee.

Whatever its exact composition, the new leadership will be confronted with the prospect of an imminent US war on its doorstep in North Korea, as well as a mounting social explosion internally as it proceeds with its pro-market agenda.



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