

Xi Jinping consolidates grip over Chinese Communist Party apparatus

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In an extraordinary step yesterday, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress not only concluded with a ringing endorsement of President Xi Jinping's opening report. It also included his "thought" into the Chinese constitution. Barely known five years ago when he became president, Xi has consolidated his position as the "core" or indispensable strongman in the CCP apparatus.

Far from being a sign of strength, the elevation of Xi to supreme leader is a sign of crisis in the CCP regime. It is beset with mounting economic and financial turmoil, and the danger of growing social unrest at home, as well as an aggressive US administration that threatens war with North Korea and China itself.

All the key resolutions were passed overwhelmingly, if not unanimously, without significant debate. The 2,300 hand-picked delegates are not accountable to the CCP's 89 million members, let alone the broader population. However, significant differences over economic and foreign policy exist between the rival party factions. In these circumstances, Xi has emerged as political supremo to ensure and impose party unity.

By entrenching himself in the constitution, Xi undoubtedly hopes to make his position unchallengeable. The new constitution does not simply contain a symbolic reference to "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era." It enshrines specific policies: the modernisation of and, absolute party control over, the army; Xi's "One Belt, One Road" geo-strategic initiative; and target dates for enhancing China's position in the world.

In reality, this is a sign of political weakness. It is aimed at giving constitutional legitimacy to the ongoing purge of critics and potential rivals through Xi's so-called anti-corruption drive and suppression of dissidents who express "politically incorrect" views.

The tightening up of Xi's control of the CCP and its police-state apparatus is the preparation for looming political and social explosions.

Xi is well aware that the CCP regime is sitting atop a social time bomb. He maintains the absurd fiction that China is progressing toward socialism in a desperate attempt to obscure the gross inequities of Chinese society that the CCP's policies of capitalist restoration have created. He told the congress social inequality is the number one challenge, but his policies of ensuring "the decisive role of market forces" and advancing "supply-side structural reform"—now enshrined in the constitution—will only widen the gulf between rich and poor.

The CCP does not represent the hundreds of millions of Chinese workers and urban and rural poor, but a tiny stratum of ultra-rich billionaires, some of whom were congress delegates, as well as layers of the wealthy middle classes, inside and outside the party.

The ideological cement to bind the party together and to subordinate the masses to the interests of the capitalist class is Chinese nationalism and xenophobia—now under the banner of Xi's "Chinese dream of national rejuvenation," which also has been included in the constitution.

By "national rejuvenation," Xi means an end to China's colonial subjugation in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and its emergence as a "strong nation" that is "moving to centre stage" in the world. "The Chinese people and nation have a great and bright future ahead," Xi told the congress as it concluded.

Xi came to power in 2012 as US President Barack Obama was implementing his "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at undermining and preparing for war against China. Trump is pursuing the same US

objective more openly and aggressively, reflecting the view in American ruling circles that Beijing is the key obstacle to Washington's world dominance.

Under Xi, China has reacted by accelerating its own military build-up and its efforts to expand its diplomatic and economic influence in Asia and around the world. Xi's signature One Belt, One Road policy involves massive infrastructure projects, including rail, roads and ports, linking the Eurasian landmass, to the exclusion of the United States. It is aimed, in particular, at encouraging the major European powers to loosen their ties to Washington.

Xi has also sought to manoeuvre with Washington. The CCP has bowed to some US demands for greater access for trade and investment in China and for punitive sanctions on North Korea, while refusing to budge on key issues such as Chinese land reclamation in the South China Sea. In his opening report to the congress, Xi declared: "No one should expect China to swallow anything that undermines its interests."

Xi has emerged from the congress as the party's undisputed strongman, publicly at least, but sharp differences undoubtedly remain. In 2012, a key potential rival, Bo Xilai, party boss in the major city of Chongqing, was removed on trumped-up corruption charges, expelled from the party, tried and jailed. Bo was an advocate of stronger measures to protect state-owned enterprises and a tougher response to the US "pivot." While Bo's closest supporters have been purged also, sections of the Chinese military no doubt continue to push for stronger measures against US provocations, particularly in the South China Sea.

At the same time, elements within the CCP apparatus are pushing for an acceleration of pro-market measures and the opening up of the Chinese economy to foreign investors. Premier Li Keqiang, who was installed in 2012 along with Xi, championed these policies and worked closely with the World Bank to draw up the China 2030 economic blueprint. Li, however, largely has been sidelined over the past five years. Xi has established key "small groups" under his control to manage many policy areas, including finance and the economy.

The congress concluded yesterday with the installation of a new central committee of 204 members and 172 alternate members. Today a central committee plenum will elect the politburo and the top decision-

making body, the politburo standing committee—currently with 25 and seven members, respectively.

The committees will be stacked with Xi's close supporters. However, the new era proclaimed by Xi will not be one of peace and stability. The attempt to hold together the sclerotic CCP apparatus through bureaucratic means only sets the stage for future political turmoil as the regime attempts to grapple with acute internal and external crises.



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