

President Xi presides over brittle Chinese regime

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1 November 2017

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) congress ended last week with the installation of a new central committee, which then rubberstamped the appointment of the 25-member Politburo and the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC).

The composition of these bodies—especially the PBSC, the party’s top decision-making committee—had been worked out weeks, if not months, in advance through Byzantine manoeuvring and factional deal-making that is completely divorced from the concerns and aspirations of the vast majority of the population.

Without a doubt, Xi emerged from the congress with his position greatly strengthened. His “thought”—that is, key elements of his nationalist “dream” for China to play a central role in world affairs—was entrenched in the constitution.

Xi’s supporters now dominate the two crucial party committees. Moreover, in a break with recent practice, no successor was appointed to the PBSC. This leaves open the possibility that Xi might not stand down in 2022 after the customary two five-year terms as party general secretary and China’s president.

The predominant theme in the US and Western press is that Xi is emerging as the new Mao, a dictatorial figure whose antagonistic policies are undermining the “international rules-based order” underpinned by the United States. In reality, the US, under President Barack Obama and now Donald Trump, has been engaged in a “pivot to Asia” to undermine China and prepare for war to ensure Washington continues to impose its rules and maintains its dominance.

This confrontational US stance has placed enormous pressure on the Chinese regime, which also faces mounting internal problems as the economy continues to slow and the debt-ridden financial system is threatened with a meltdown. The huge social chasm between a tiny layer of the super-rich billionaires, whose interests the CCP defends, and the vast majority of the population, is generating enormous social tensions.

In this fraught situation, Xi has emerged not so much as an unchallengeable political strongman, but as a Bonapartist figure, who serves to safeguard party unity by moderating, arbitrating and, if necessary, suppressing the myriad competing and conflicting interests in the CCP’s massive bureaucratic apparatus.

The British-based *Economist* commented last month: “His predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, were appointed mainly to continue Deng’s [Xiaoping] reforms. Mr Xi was appointed to save the party. The notion that the Communist Party might need saving will sound peculiar. Although China experiences tens of

thousands of anti-government demonstrations each year, these are local affrays which are mostly reactions to greedy local governments...

“Yet that is not how Mr Xi saw matters in 2012. To him, and to the elite who chose him as China’s leader, the party faced an existential crisis.” After relating a warning by Xi about the fate of Emperor Chu [murdered in 202 BC], the article continued: “It is not ancient history that frightens Mr Xi. It is the disintegration of the Soviet Union. For him, everything begins and ends with the party... If it collapses, so will the country.”

Since assuming the post of CCP general secretary in 2012, Xi has accumulated significant powers in his hands. He has restructured the Chinese military—the People’s Liberation Army—to concentrate control in the Central Military Commission, which he chairs. He has sidelined Premier Li Keqiang, whose post traditionally puts him in charge of economic affairs, by blaming Li for the country’s economic woes, particularly the 2015 stock market plunge. Xi now determines policy, including on financial and economic matters, through an array of so-called leading small groups that answer to him.

Xi has also exploited a vast anti-corruption purge, led by his trusted supporter Wang Qishan, to eliminate key rivals and weaken factional opponents. More than 1 million out of 88 million CCP members have been investigated and at least 100,000 have been indicted, including more than 150 “tigers” or officials above the rank of vice-minister.

Just months before the congress, a leading contender to take over from Xi in 2022, Sun Zhengcai, was dismissed from the powerful post of CCP boss in the major city of Chongqing, disgraced and finally expelled in September. Conveniently, the corruption scandal enabled Chen Min’er, who is widely regarded as Xi’s protégé, to be installed in his place.

However, Xi’s accumulation of power is a sign of the CCP’s deep fissures and tensions. While the composition of the Politburo and PBSC has strengthened Xi’s position, he has been careful to maintain a factional balance and, in the main, to observe the unwritten rules governing the party leadership since the late 1980s.

The new Chinese leadership

Despite widespread speculation to the contrary, anti-corruption boss Wang Qishan, 69, was not reappointed to either committee. If he had been reinstalled, it would have been a breach of the de-facto retirement age of 68 and a sign that Xi himself might not retire in 2022 and seek a third term. All the current PBSC members are due for retirement in 2022.

Li Keqiang also held onto his position and a PBSC seat, in the face of some conjecture in the media that he might be ousted. Li is aligned with one of the party's two main factions—the Communist Youth League faction of ex-President Hu Jintao—which has been seriously weakened over the past five years. Xi is more closely connected to the so-called Shanghai Gang of former President Jiang Zemin, although Xi has established his own bases of support.

The various rival “gangs” and factions are not simply based on personalities. Rather they represent the competing interests of various sections of big business, the state bureaucracy and the military, as well as the state-owned enterprises. Insofar as policy differences exist, they are tactical in nature. Those like Li who advocated accelerated pro-market restructuring and a more conciliatory approach to the US have been increasingly marginalised.

However, ousting Li could have provoked factional warfare inside the party. As well as Li, the Communist Youth League faction gained an additional PBSC seat through the appointment of Wang Yang, vice-premier of the State Council, China's cabinet, and widely seen as an aggressive proponent of pro-market restructuring.

The four other PBSC members, all with close ties to Xi, are:

- * Li Zhanshu, director of the party's General Office, has effectively operated as Xi's chief of staff and frequently travels with him. He and Xi worked together at the start of their careers in Hebei province and transferred to Xi's home province of Shaanxi.

- * Wang Huning has worked closely with Xi to develop his ideology and policies. As head of the party's Central Policy Research Office since 2002, he has served Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and now Xi. Wang also often travels with Xi.

- * Zhao Leiji served as party secretary of Shaanxi province and is seen as part of Xi's “Shaanxi Gang”. He was head of the party's powerful Organisation Department prior to the congress and is slated to take over from Wang Qishan as anti-corruption chief, in charge of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

- * Han Zheng is aligned with the “Shanghai Gang,” having served as Shanghai mayor and then party boss. He was Xi's deputy when Xi was Shanghai party boss in 2007 and cemented his relations with Jiang Zemin's faction. Han has been mooted as a replacement premier should Li Keqiang be removed before the 2022 congress.

Xi has also strengthened his position in the 25-member Politburo, which includes the seven PBSC members and an additional 18. According to some analysts, as many as 15 Politburo members have close ties to Xi.

Moreover, while no one in the PBSC is eligible to replace Xi in 2022, there are three contenders in the Politburo who are young enough to serve 10 years as president and CCP general secretary. Two of the three—Chen Min'er and Ding Xuexiang—are closely connected and beholden to Xi.

The third contender is Hu Chunhua, who is aligned with the Communist Youth League, a long time protégé of Hu Jintao and regarded as Hu Jintao's pick for the top post in 2022. By the CCP's informal succession rule, the top job should alternate between the two ruling factions. That means Hu should be Xi's successor and should have been appointed to the PBSC last week.

The fact that Hu was not promoted could indicate that Xi, rather than trying to remain as president after 2022, is preparing to anoint his own successor. The most likely pick is Chen Min'er who was propelled into the significant post of party boss in one of China's top four cities, and now has been elevated to the Politburo.

Ding Xuexiang is likewise closely tied to Xi. In 2007, he served as political secretary to Xi during his eight months as Shanghai party secretary, then in 2013 moved to Beijing to become head of the party chief office—in effect Xi's personal secretary. He is expected to become Xi's new chief of staff.

The new party leadership is thus the result of careful calculation. The only obvious rule that has been broken is that no successor has been nominated. As a result, Xi has left his options open: he could use the next five years to engineer a vacancy on the top PBSC and install Chen Min'er or Ding Xuexiang as his nominated successor, or move to remain in the job for another five years.

Former Australian ambassador Geoff Raby noted this week in the *Australian Financial Review*: “The greater power that Xi assumes and the more he acts without constraint, the more brittle the Communist state becomes.” Leaving aside the absurd reference to China as a communist state, the remark highlights the weakness of the regime.

Given the extreme geo-political tensions in Asia and the world, and the mounting economic and social contradictions in China itself, the massive CCP bureaucracy apparatus, not to speak of Xi's schemes and manoeuvres, is likely, under the pressure of great events, to be torn by turmoil and crises.



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