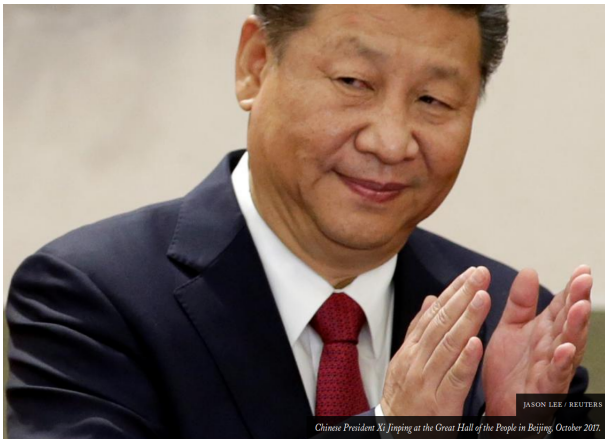

Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, October 2017.

China's Return to Strongman Rule[1]

The Meaning of Xi Jinping's Power Grab

By Minxin Pei

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A new era has begun in Chinese politics. On October 24, as the curtain fell on the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress, party officials revised their organization's charter to enshrine a new guiding ideological

1 https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-01/chinas-return-strongman-rule?cid=nlc-fa_twofa-20171102

principle: “Xi Jinping Thought.” Few observers know exactly what this doctrine entails—it is an amorphous collection of ideas about maintaining China’s one-party state and transforming the country into a global power—but most immediately grasped the political symbolism of its introduction. The party has elevated the Chinese ruler’s ideological contributions to the same level as those of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the only other CCP leaders whose ideas have been so canonized.

This was only the first inkling that Xi had scored a major political victory at the party congress. The real extent of his

triumph became clear the next day, when party officials selected the new members of the Politburo Standing Committee, China's top decision-making body. Xi stacked the seven-member committee with loyalists, all of whom will be too old to stand a chance of taking his place at the next party congress, in 2022. As a result, Xi's rule is now set to last for the next 15 years and perhaps beyond.

However powerful Xi appears to be, he now must earn the political capital to secure an extended term as China's leader. In practice, he will need to deliver on his promises to rebalance and sustain China's economic growth and to restructure its legal system.

THE GROWTH OF XI'S POWER

Of the seven members of the CCP's last Standing Committee, only two remain: Xi and his deputy, Premier Li Keqiang. The body's five other members are all new, and four of them are allies of Xi.

Li Zhanshu, the party's new number three, forged a close friendship with Xi more than 30 years ago and was Xi's chief of staff during his first term, which began in 2007. Another loyalist, Zhao Leji, will serve as China's new anticorruption tsar, acting as Xi's top enforcer. The former occupant of that office, Wang Qishan, played a pivotal

role in helping Xi purge his rivals and consolidate power during his first term.

Many China watchers have identified two other new figures on the Standing Committee, Wang Huning and Han Zheng, as members of the so-called Shanghai Gang, the elite faction affiliated with former President Jiang Zemin—a line of thinking that places their loyalty to Xi in question. But this assessment is incorrect. Wang has served as the chief ideological adviser to three party bosses—Jiang, Hu Jintao, and Xi—and he is unlikely to risk his ties with Xi by sticking with Jiang's faction, which has been decimated by Xi's

anticorruption purge. As for Han, he is a competent, low-key technocrat who lacks an abiding loyalty to the Shanghai Gang. In fact, when Xi was Shanghai's party chief from 2006 to 2007, Han was the city's mayor and Xi's right-hand man. The Standing Committee's seventh member is Wang Yang, a man with ties to the rival Youth League faction. He will become the head of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, an advisory body to the party.

Xi also succeeded in filling the 25-person Politburo with allies. At least 11 of the Politburo's 15 new members

belong to Xi's faction. As a result, the president can now count on 18 votes in that body. His decisions will be endorsed overwhelmingly by the Politburo and its Standing Committee, endowing them with extraordinary authority. What is more, Xi's allies in the Politburo, some of them relatively young, will be strong contenders for promotion to the Standing Committee at the 20th National Congress in 2022.

The greatest political victory that Xi achieved at the congress was to end the party's practice of formally designating a new leader at least five years ahead of the transfer of power. The tradition

began in 1992, when Deng picked Hu as Jiang's successor ten years before Hu took office. In 2007, the party similarly chose Xi as Hu's successor. This practice has reduced the risk of struggles over succession and has helped enforce the party's informal term limits for its top leaders of two stints of five years each. But the party never codified these traditions in its charter, and an incumbent seeking to extend his rule would always have been able to end them with enough raw power.

This was clearly the case for Xi, and he and his allies played their cards brilliantly to break from precedent. First,

in the fall of 2016, CCP officials named Xi the party's "core leader," making him the only leader since Deng to have assumed that coveted title on his own and sending a message to other senior figures that Xi's position was unassailable. (Jiang was named core leader by Deng; Hu never received the title.) A few months later, in January of this year, Chinese security agents kidnapped the tycoon Xiao Jianhua from his apartment in the Four Seasons in Hong Kong. The abduction was meant to preempt potential challenges to Xi's plan: as the moneyman for many top Chinese leaders, Xiao likely held

incriminating information about some of Xi's rivals.

In July, Xi made another move, ordering the arrest of the Chongqing party chief Sun Zhengcai on charges of corruption. Sun's fall was meaningful because of his association with Jiang's faction and because he is so young that he would have been a plausible successor to Xi had he remained untouched. (Politburo members generally have to be younger than 55 to be eligible for consideration as future successors.) Now that Sun has been purged, there is only one Politburo member young enough to be a possible successor to Xi in 2022: the former

Guangdong party chief Hu Chunhua. But the 55-year-old Hu did not get promoted to the Standing Committee, apparently making him ineligible to take Xi's place in 2022. He will likely assume the largely symbolic vice presidency next March.

With so few options, Xi will have the perfect excuse to delay a decision about who should succeed him. His dominance of the Politburo and its Standing Committee will empower him to do just that, securing him a third term in office at the next party congress in 2022.

Xi will amend the party's charter and China's constitution to legitimize the

extension of his power. He could, for instance, assume the position of party chairman, restoring that defunct role in the party's charter and restarting the clock on his leadership of the CCP. As for the limit of two terms for China's head of state (an office usually referred to as the "presidency" in English but that properly translates as the "chairmanship"), it could be lifted with a semantic change: officials could revise the Chinese constitution so that Xi's formal title becomes "president." By securing two new five-year terms as head of both party and government, Xi

would be able to hold on to power until at least 2032.

RULE BY LAW

The biggest questions about China's new era surround Xi's agenda. Few expect Xi to become a political reformer, given the crackdowns on civil society and Internet freedom during his first term. Yet optimists believe that Xi's newfound supremacy will grant him a free hand to pursue other changes, introducing pro-market economic reforms and restructuring China's legal system so that it protects property rights and promotes development more effectively.

In fact, little suggests that a new wave of economic reform is in the offing. Xi acquired immense authority during his first term, rolling out an ambitious blueprint in 2013 for overhauling the Chinese economy to, as that plan put it, “[allow] market forces to play a decisive role.” Yet even then, he made only modest progress. Thanks to its accommodating monetary policy, Beijing’s credit-fueled, investment-driven growth model remained firmly in place, helping to raise China’s debt-to-GDP ratio from 215 percent in 2012 to 242 percent in 2016. And although China’s heavily indebted state-owned

enterprises are a drag on the country's economy, they still occupy a special place in Xi's vision of the future. In July 2016, he argued that the firms should be made "stronger, better, and bigger, without any reservations."

Chinese leaders' confidence in existing policies is another reason observers should temper their hopes for economic reform. Despite the warnings about unsustainable debt producing a financial meltdown, Beijing has not yet paid a real price for sticking to its strategy of supporting growth with injections of credit. Indeed, China's recent economic performance—its GDP will almost

certainly expand by more than the official target of 6.5 to 6.7 percent this year—has deepened policymakers' faith in the current model. Finally, because aggressive economic reforms have in the past all been prompted by shocks or crises, observers should discount the probability that Beijing will pursue deep changes when the economy is performing reasonably well, as it is today.

The most likely political priority for Xi in the immediate future will instead be an overhaul of China's legal system, aimed not at establishing genuine rule of law but at realizing rule by law, under

which the state would use the legal system to maintain political, social, and economic control. Should this be the case, regression, not progress, will be the more likely outcome.

There are three signs suggesting that Xi will focus on legal reform. First, the party congress endorsed Xi's plan to overhaul the legal system by establishing a "leading group on comprehensively governing the country according to law," a body that Xi will head. Next, Xi assigned his most trusted ally, Li Zhanshu, to chair the National People's Congress, the country's legislative body, which would draft and pass the laws

essential to the realization of Xi's vision. Both of those measures suggest that legal reform will soon receive a good deal of high-level attention. Finally, Xi is a firm believer in China's tradition of rule by law, and the new leading group's focus on "comprehensive" governance reflects that ambition.

To be sure, Xi passed a few major laws aimed at social control during his first term, tightening China's cybersecurity practices and restricting foreign nongovernmental organizations. But much remains to be done to reassert the party's power over society and to

provide a solid legal basis for hard authoritarianism.

The Politburo Standing Committee: Xi Jinping (center), Wang Yang (top left), Li Keqiang (top center), Han Zheng (top right), Zhao Leji (bottom left), Li Zhanshu (bottom center) and Wang Huning (bottom right).

For instance, China could impose additional restrictions on domestic

NGOs, introduce new laws on ideological education in colleges and universities, or rewrite criminal laws so that they become even more effective instruments in the suppression of domestic dissent. The goal is to transform China from a decentralized, post-totalitarian regime into a hard authoritarian one ruled by a disciplined Leninist party.

RED TAPE

In the short term, Xi's plans will not encounter much overt resistance. His crackdown on dissent and civil society has been depressingly effective and has eliminated any significant threat to the

regime's rule in the near future. Xi's supremacy within the party is now so overwhelming that it is inconceivable that any of his colleagues will dare challenge him.

The real resistance to Xi's ambitions will come from China's vast bureaucracy. Numbering in the millions, the regime's lower and middle officials are first and foremost self-interested human beings, and they care far more about increasing their own privilege and wealth than about promoting abstract ideological goals. As Xi has dismantled the sharing of power and spoils that characterized China's post-Tiananmen order, these

bureaucrats' prospects for money and power have dimmed. No longer are there several elite cliques to join or multiple patrons to serve. Today, every official must compete for favors from a regime dominated by a single faction, and there are fewer paths to advancement than there were before Xi took power. Worse still, Xi's anticorruption crackdown has eliminated the lavish bribes and perks that underwrote bureaucrats' lifestyles for most of the past two decades. Unless Xi relents and allows the regime's rank and file to start feathering their nests again, loyalty will lose its appeal.

To be sure, most lower-level apparatchiks will not abandon the party or display their unhappiness in the open. Instead, they will do what Chinese bureaucrats have done for thousands of years: passively resist edicts from the top. The bureaucrats' goal will be to make Xi appreciate their value and reward them appropriately, perhaps by ending his crackdown on corruption and China's austerity drive. The only way to accomplish this will be through bureaucratic subterfuge aimed at catching Xi's attention by slowing the regime's administrative machinery and stalling China's economic engine.

However deep Xi’s authority may be, it will erode quickly if the economy slows for more than a few years, and China’s bureaucrats know it.

Xi would not be the first all-powerful Chinese leader to face a recalcitrant bureaucracy. Mao confronted a similar challenge in the early 1960s, when he thought that party apparatchiks lacked sufficient ideological fervor. One of his motives for launching the Cultural Revolution was to use mass terror to discipline the bureaucracy and restore its revolutionary spirit.

Yet Xi is no believer in mass movements, and he lacks the charisma of

Mao, who could mobilize hundreds of millions of ordinary Chinese people into action. He must instead seek to extend the reach of his power from the level of the Central Committee to China's provinces, cities, and counties. That will be a laborious and time-consuming process, involving, for instance, a major drive to vet and recruit promising apparatchiks at the local level.

Many lower- and middle-level bureaucrats will get on Xi's bandwagon. But as his base expands, it may also sow the seeds of intraparty struggles. Realizing that the next battle for political supremacy will be waged in ten to 15

years, when Xi approaches his own exit from power, his ostensibly loyal followers will be more interested in building up their own power than in implementing Xi's agenda. This is what happened during the Cultural Revolution: after Mao vanquished his rivals, his loyalists, the Lin Biao faction and the Gang of Four, quickly turned on each other out of fear that the other group was positioning itself to succeed the aging chairman.

IN XI'S HANDS

In the years after Mao's death, Chinese leaders came to understand that concentrating power in the hands of a

single figure could spell disaster for the party.

That is why the survivors of the Cultural Revolution banded together in the 1980s to make sure that a Mao-like leader could never again rule China. The changes ushered in by that group—such as collective leadership, the informal rules regarding succession, and implicit

Xi Jinping, Hu Jintao, and Jiang Zemin in Beijing November 2012.

guarantees of security for senior leaders—delivered a level of elite stability unprecedented in the party's history. They also helped the regime avoid making the kinds of dangerous mistakes that can follow from the consolidation of power in a single pair of hands.

Chinese officials seem to have forgotten those lessons. Now that the CCP has returned to strongman rule, its future will depend almost entirely on the quality of Xi's decisions. There will be few constraints on how he makes them. The last time the party had a leader with such unchecked power, the consequences were calamitous. One can only hope that

Chinese leaders know what they are doing this time—and that the result will be different.

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