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China

Twentieth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: the tipping point

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV573 - October 2022 -

Publication date: Friday 28 October 2022

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The 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party represents a very symbolic tipping point: the predicted break with the political order established at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s under the aegis of Deng Xiaoping has now been consummated. Xi Jinping has granted himself personal power unprecedented in the history of contemporary China.

The tipping point can also be understood in a more general sense. Under his previous terms of office, Xi Jinping's China benefited from exceptionally favourable conditions for its growth and international expansion, to become the second biggest world power, far ahead of Russia. That is changing. It was at the heart of the market globalization that is flatlining today and is not recovering from the blow of the Covid-19 pandemic. Out-of-control inflation and financial instability raise fears of a full-blown recession. The United States is back in the Asia-Pacific after a long period of impotence in this region. The inter-imperialist conflict is sharpening on all terrains, including that of high technology (semiconductors). In this context, internal tensions are becoming increasingly difficult to manage.

Nothing indicates, at the end of the 20th Congress, that Xi Jinping has taken the measure of the problems, while he is busy consolidating his grip on the state. The ability of the regime to steer economic development has long been an important asset in China's take-off. However, the new political regime shaped by Xi now risks proving to be a dangerous handicap.

Internal monolithism

Deng Xiaoping's reforms initiated in the 1980s and 1990s aimed to engage post-Maoist China on the capitalist road by ensuring the "bourgeoisification" of a section of the bureaucracy and, on the other hand, by providing the country with a stable political regime, for the benefit of the elites. Collegial functioning at each level of leadership and the regular renewal of governing bodies would, *inter alia*, prevent the concentration of power in the hands of one man.

During his first two terms, Xi Jinping worked to establish a governance that was opposed on every point to that which Deng had promoted [1]. The 20th Congress of the CCP was an opportunity to complete what can be called a political counterrevolution in capitalist China. Xi is beginning his third term as head of the CCP, whereas previously no one could remain in office for more than two successive five-year terms. While placing his relatives in key positions, Deng was content to be chairman of the Central Military Commission. Xi is chairman of the commission, party secretary-general and president of the People's Republic.

With seven members, the Politburo Standing Committee is the core of power within the CCP. It traditionally had to incorporate a minimum of factional pluralism and the designated successor to the Secretary General. The question of succession does not arise, since Xi intends to ensure other mandates – he now wears the habit of a triple Number 1 for life.

Li Keqiang sat (without weight) on the standing committee as Prime Minister. He has not been renewed. He is close to Hu Jintao, the previous general secretary of the CP – the same Hu who was (apparently without his consent) pulled from the podium by two men in black during the closing session of the congress – a rather strange sight in a ceremony where everything is meticulously organized. Moreover, Xi wants to marginalize in the country's governance the administration (another counter-reform) that Li embodied. Although the party's pre-eminence had previously been assured, the plurality of centres of authority gave flexibility to the system and allowed the people to address more

than one interlocutor. The authority of the party must henceforth be exclusive.

Xi Jinping's main rivals have been asked to retire and are not being reappointed to the new 205-member central committee, which has been renewed at 65 percent. Usually, the age limit for election to a party leadership is set at 68 (Xi is 69 and is preparing to live for many more years at the head of the CP). Wang Yang (67) was nevertheless ousted despite being chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (a body composed of "democratic parties", i.e., categorical fronts of the CCP, which allows informal exchanges); For Beijing watchers, he was considered too liberal economically.

However, we must be careful not to rationalize factional conflicts within the party apparatus too much. These are often struggles over power rather than orientation. Or at least we must avoid raising them to a confrontation between "reformists" (Li Keqiang, Wang Yang and so on) and "conservatives", expecting the former to fight the latter. The hopes placed in Deng Xiaoping to democratize the country for the benefit of the population proved dramatically illusory with the bloody repression of social movements in 1989. Since then, three blocs have formed around General Secretaries Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. None ever questioned the dictatorship of the party over society or considered the possibility of an organized political opposition, even if the first two could tolerate individual dissent [\[2\]](#).

Xi's peculiarity is to have purged the rival cliques or factions, as he purged the army and the secret services. The 20th Congress was an opportunity to complete his stranglehold on the party-state apparatus.

The liegemen

The list of the seven new members of the Politburo Standing Committee shows how personal loyalty to Xi is what matters most to reach the holy of holies. In addition to Xi Jinping, it includes, in order of protocol:

Li Qiang (63 years old). Party secretary in Shanghai, a metropolis that has been the springboard for many national careers, he enters for the first time. Particularity: it was under his authority that the especially brutal and rigid implementation of the Zero Covid policy had disastrous economic consequences and provoked strong popular resistance. A notorious incompetent, but no matter, he is a familiar companion of Xi (he was with him in 2004-2007 in the province of Zhejiang of which Xi was then the boss).

Zhao Leji (65 years old). A linchpin of the police state that has put its powers at the service of Xi. He headed the party's main anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, and headed the Organization Department, which oversees the appointment of all senior officials.

Wang Huning (67 years old). A former academic, he is Xi Jinping's chief ideologue, his advisor on ideology, propaganda and international politics. A follower of "neo-authoritarianism", he advocated a strong and centralized state to counter foreign influence and opposed the principle of collective leadership (defended by Deng).

Cai Qi (66 years old). Party secretary in Beijing, his entry into the standing committee came as a surprise to Beijing watchers. He was a leading advocate of Xi's "Zero Covid" policy and oversaw the 2022 Winter Olympics.

Ding Xuexiang (60 years old). Little known to the public. Xi Jinping's confidant, he was his political secretary in 2007 when the latter led the party in Shanghai and followed him, becoming private secretary and gatekeeper when he took over as head of the country.

Li Xi (66 years old). A long-time member of Xi's inner circle. He rose through the ranks of the party in various provinces. He is now party leader in Guangdong (where Canton, Guangzhou is located), being responsible for the development of the Greater Bay Area, Xi's master plan for an economic power that integrates nine Chinese cities with Hong Kong and Macau.

When it comes to personal power, Xi Jinping is often described as a new Mao Zedong. This is a misreading. Not only do they belong to two different historical eras, but the team that came to power in the CCP in 1935, during the great retreat of the Long March, was not made up of liegemen, far from it. Mao was able to bring together proven cadres, strong personalities, often at the head of army corps, from various backgrounds. Several of them had even opposed him in the multiple factional battles that had torn the CCP apart.

Constitutional enthronement

Constitutional changes have been introduced to further elevate the personal status of Xi Jinping and his "thought". The congress approved amendments, including the "Two Establishments" and the "Two Safeguards," aimed at placing Xi at the heart of the party and his political thought as the underlying ideology. Criticizing Xi or questioning the validity of his speech becomes an attack on the Constitution!

Xi's cult of personality has reached delusional heights, like Mao's at the dawn of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969). The resolution adopted at the November 2021 plenary meeting of the Central Committee already affirmed, concerning Xi, that the present times represented "the most magnificent epic in the history of the Chinese nation over millennia," with "socialism with Chinese characteristics [having] entered a new era" since he came to power. That his "thought is the quintessence of Chinese culture and soul" and his presence at the "heart" of the party "is of decisive importance (...) to promoting the historical process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

At the origin of Mao's cult was the desire to oppose a Chinese authority to the cult of Stalin, which was used to regiment the Communist International, but once one has such a weapon in his hands, one also uses it to settle scores or strengthen his hand in factional struggles, whether they have a political content (they often did have at the time) or not. As for "thought", Xi's is not a continuation of Mao's. Although he never managed to learn a foreign language and did not travel as so many Asian revolutionaries did, Mao read what he found in translation, and was exposed to multiple intellectual, Chinese, regional or Western influences. His official works are rather boring, but many internal party documents were made public during the Cultural Revolution and are much livelier. Not being a sinologist, I hesitate to venture into this field, but some consider that he had a conception of history imbued with Taoism; he was always convinced that societies evolve only under the impact of their internal contradictions and therefore of social struggles. Invoking contradictions can obviously lead to better or worse, as illustrated by the story of the Great Helmsman.

Masculinism

The Standing Committee of the Political Bureau did not include any women; this remains the case. However, since 1997, there was always one in the PB (and even two, for a short time). A quota system had been established requiring the presence of at least one cadre at all lower levels of leadership, which contributed to a small but steady flow of female candidates.

Today, the Politburo (24 members) is entirely male, Sun Chunlan, known as the Covid Tsar, was neither re-elected

nor replaced. According to “Guardian” journalist Emma Graham-Harrison, in more than 70 years, she was one of only three women to have risen so far in the party apparatus on the basis of her own activity, without being the wife of a powerful man or a “propaganda tool”! [3] However, it was rumoured that another woman would be integrated into the Politburo (the names of two candidates were circulating). On a list of 205 members of the new voting central committee made public on 22 October, there were only 11 women.

The CCP has nearly a hundred million members, but less than a third are women, and this proportion declines at every stage of the hierarchy. When Xi Jinping began to systematically crack down on civil society organizations, he specifically targeted feminists who yet posed no danger. In general, Xi's hardening of power is accompanied by a truly reactionary evolution on so-called social issues. To increase the declining fertility rate, he exerts pressure on young people who resisted his injunctions. Under these conditions, it is feared that reproductive rights will one day be called into question. As Graham-Harrison concludes, quoting a lecturer “One thing that is safe to say is that without women leadership, women's issues will be underrepresented.”

Problems remain

Xi Jinping has been re-elected but the problems facing his regime remain.

Two figures illustrate the extent of the socio-economic transformations during the previous period:

- China and the United States account for more than half of the world's billionaires, with 1,058 for China (32.8% of the world total) and 696 for the United States (21.6%) [4].
- The same applies to companies in the Fortune Global 500 (2020). In the lead, China with 124 companies (24.8% of the total) followed by the United States with 121 companies (24.2%). [5].

China's internal economic dynamism is exhausted if we believe the following data, partly taken from an article by journalist Helen Davidson. [6]

- *A fall in gross domestic product growth.* After doubling from 2012 to 2021, growth is slowing sharply to the point that, for the first time in thirty years, it has been lower than that of the Asia-Pacific region.
- *Social inequalities.* During the same period, according to World Bank figures, gross national income per capita also doubled to \$11,890 in 2021. Last year, the CCP said it had eradicated absolute poverty in the country. Nevertheless, income inequality remains high and the Covid outbreak has had many implications for Chinese workers, especially those migrating to cities far from their home villages. As the level of social protection is very low, households are led to save as much as possible. The structural unemployment rate has exceeded 5% since 2019. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2019 it reached the record level of 19.9% for the 16-24 age group.
- *The crisis of the real estate market.* The real estate sector has captured a large part of investment. According to economist Mary-Françoise Renard, in the strict sense, it represents 14% of GDP, but 30% if we include the sectors concerned upstream (cement or steel for example) and downstream (decoration, furniture). [7] There is a great deal of interdependence between these sectors, which weakens them in the event of difficulties. That is precisely what is happening today. Urbanization and the need to own property in order to marry have stimulated demand, but also encouraged speculation and overproduction. The housing crisis has profound social consequences: many people have invested their savings in buying apartments that may never be built or in new cities that will remain phantoms. It is affecting the entire financial sector and a debt crisis is looming. The national government or local governments sometimes intervene massively to prevent the bankruptcy of developers, but this does not solve anything in substance.
- *The demographic crisis* is taking shape in China, as in much of East Asia. Despite all its efforts, the government

has not succeeded in reversing the downward trend in birth rates. By 2021, it fell to its lowest level in 61 years, with young people denouncing the high cost of living, unequal gender roles, stagnating career prospects and a lack of maternity services. Fewer and fewer people are getting married every year.

Inter-imperialist conflicts

Joe Biden's Asian refocusing and Russia's invasion of Ukraine are bad news for Xi Jinping. It is not possible to elaborate on this issue in the context of this article, but the period of triumphalist expansion of Chinese power seems to be over. Xi has failed to get Putin to bend his hard-line policy which risks having significant consequences for Chinese influence in Eastern and Western Europe.

The Philippines, after the return to power of the Marcos clan, is strengthening its ties with Washington. In the South Pacific, Beijing had signed a strategic agreement in the Solomon Islands – they nevertheless joined the so-called “American Partnership for the Pacific” initiative on 20 September in which fifteen states in the region are already participating, including the Cook Islands and Papua New Guinea [8].

Despite considerable investment, China is unable to catch up in the key area of high-end semiconductors. Joe Biden is now doing everything to prevent him from acquiring or developing certain advanced technologies. However, the degree of interdependence of economies remains such that the Sino-US “rift» is not self-evident. The transnational companies of the Western bloc take a very dim view of the strengthening of the political control exercised by Beijing on investment, but do not want to reduce their profits by relocating their production to the United States as Biden demands.

Xi Jinping has broken all channels of cooperation with Washington, including on health and climate change – areas that should escape the logic of confrontation between powers. His “thought” does not go so far as to assimilate two of the major crises threatening our world.

PS:

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[1] See Pierre Rousset, Xi Jinping: from one-party dictatorship to one-clique dictatorship, 17 October 2022. ESSF: <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article64494>

[2] Thanks to Au Loong-yu for his input on this issue... among others. See on IVP [One-Man Show Disrupted by a Nobody](#) .

[3] Emma Graham-Harrison, “Women pushed even further from power in Xi Jinping's China”, 23 October 2022, *The Guardian*. This chapter on masculinism draws heavily on this article.

[4] <https://newpol.org/russia-an-imperialist-power-or-a-non-hegemonic-empire-in-gestation-a-reply-to-the-argentinean-economist-claudio-katz-an-essay-with-8-tables/>

[5] Fortune Global 500 (2020). Op. cit.

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/chinas-communist-party-congress-everything-you-need-to-know>

[7] <https://theconversation.com/xx-congres-du-pcc-le-modele-economique-chinois-est-il-compatible-avec-les-ambitions-de-puissance-et-de-modernite-192694>

[8] Pierre-Antoine Donnet, "Taiwan : les tensions entre Chine et États-Unis se radicalisent", 10 octobre 2022, Asialyst : <https://asialyst.com/fr/2022/10/05/tensions-chine-etats-unis-taiwan-radicalisent/>