

XI JINPING'S "COMMON DESTINY FOR MANKIND"

Sean Golden, Senior Associate Researcher, CIDOB

As expected, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China confirmed Xi Jinping's third consecutive mandate as General Secretary, but there were some surprises. A key element of the Congress is the political report that identifies ideological "lines" and their policies, as much as the need shown by Xi to emphasise his core leadership in the three pillars of power. There was also a special warning about the current world context and preparing for the future. The war in Ukraine creates new risks for China as well as a geopolitical vacuum that Xi Jinping will try to fill.



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The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) confirmed Xi Jinping for a third consecutive 5-year mandate as General Secretary. This was expected but there were some surprises, and the Congress was the first act in a drama that will continue till March 2023 with the yet to be confirmed renovation of State government officeholders. There are three pillars of power in China: the CPC, the State Council and the Central Military Commission (CMC). In theory they are separate but equal. The Party and the State each have their own constitution and their own authority, but in practice, the CPC is more equal (the CMC reports to the Party, not to the State).

It is often difficult to distinguish which pillar of power is more decisive when the same person controls the three of them, as has Xi Jinping: CPC General Secretary, State Council President and CMC Chairman. He will continue to be General Secretary and could be re-confirmed as President in March – or not. The concept of 最高领导人 *Zuìgāo Língdǎorén* “paramount leader” has been applied to every Chinese leader, as has the term 核心 *héxīn* “core” or “centre”. So, it is not surprising that Xi was defined as the core of the leadership. But such repetitive emphasis on his being the core does raise doubts. If it were unquestionably true, there would be no need to say so. If his power were truly consolidated, he could cede the Presidency to someone else. Whether he maintains the Presidency or cedes it, the decision will be worth examining.

It will also be important to know who remains as State officeholder, who not and who are the newcomers. One key example will be the fate of Wang Qishan, one of the most powerful contemporary leaders, who abandoned the Standing Committee five years ago for reasons of age but subsequently became a Vice-President of the State Council (without portfolio), presumably to bolster Xi.

A key element of the Congress is the political report, full of slogans that are often dismissed by Western observers. As in the West, however, they do carry deeper meaning (“Make America Great Again” implies white supremacy, for example, and

“Levelling Up” begins to imply “Bregret”). The meaning of these 提法 *tífǎ* slogans needs to be unpacked. They identify ideological “lines” and their policies. Their correct interpretation can often be problematical and depends on the knowledge of the language and of the CPC history. A very important *tífǎ* has disappeared completely in this Congress: 变法 *biànfǎ* “political reform” is never mentioned, although it was frequent in previous reports. Whereas, an important new one has appeared: 共同富裕 *gòngtóng fùyù* “common prosperity”. Historically, it is a Maoist slogan. But the CPC ideologues, under the guidance of Wang Huning, whose membership of the Standing Committee was re-confirmed (he was even promoted), have redefined Maoist terminology. “Common prosperity” seems to recognise the existence of income inequality on the one hand, and of profiteering on the other, and insinuates the need for a better distribution of wealth and an upper limit to profits. It remains to be seen how this will work out. Previous administrations preached 小康社会 *xiǎokāng shèhuì*, the achievement of “a moderately prosperous society”, but allowed some to become prosperous more quickly than others. Growing income inequality led Hu Jintao to call for 和谐社会 *héxié shèhuì*, a “harmonious society”. The former policy promoted efficiency in the creation of wealth, while the latter promoted social equity, reflecting opposing ideological lines within the CPC. Elders like Wang Qishan see the correct balance of these two policies as key to the system’s survival. The Party is sensitive to popular support or the loss of it (as may happen in response to zero-Covid restrictions). Xi seems to be coming down on the side of equity in this case. The change of slogan also differentiates him from Hu, whose mysterious removal from the Congress created chaotic semiotic stress.

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Further surprises were the complete absence of women from the Politburo and the absence of 团派 *Tuánpài*, people who rose to leadership through the Communist Youth League, often from humble origins, as opposed to 太子党 *Tàizǐdǎng* “princelings”, the children of revolutionary veterans. There was no promotion of a younger generation of leaders to the Politburo, and previously high-ranking leaders like Wang Yang and Hu Chunhua were demoted. Li Qiang and Cai Qi, seen to be loyal to Xi, were promoted to the Standing Committee with no previous experience of governing at the national level, a common criterion in the past (Li could become Prime Minister).

Finally, Xi gave a special warning about the current world context and preparing for the future. The first premise of Chinese strategists has been the unlikelihood of a world war. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the NATO/EU response have changed that. Both the US and the EU have confirmed that China is a “strategic competitor”. This is not limited to security or economic competition. They see China as an ideological alternative to a liberal democratic system that has entered into crisis, and as an attractive alternative development model for the non-Western world. As a result, China finds itself in a more hostile geopolitical and geoeconomic environment, and Xi warned the Party about the need to prepare for an uncertain future. This preparation included the reconfirmation of Yang Zhouxia on the CMC and the appointment of He Weidong, both of whom are generals with combat experience, as well as the promotion of the experienced Foreign Minister Wang Yi to the Politburo.

Xi also called for “international democracy”, meaning the reform of international organisations to reduce the preponderance of North American and European voting rights in favour of a more equitable multipolar distribution of power. He advocated for 人类命运共同体 *rénlèi mìngyùn gòngtóngtǐ* “a community of common destiny for mankind”, and the official press subsequently called upon everyone to “grasp” Xi Jinping’s own 世界观 *shìjièguān* “world view”. This seems to apply to the world stage as well, considering he has participated actively in meetings of world leaders since the Congress. China does not support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but it will not be subordinated to NATO leadership, and in this China harmonises with much of the world as well. In this regard, the invasion creates a geopolitical vacuum China can fill. As always, though, China’s ability to act abroad will depend on its ability to maintain stability at home.