



Xi Jinping Consolidates Power in Beijing

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At the Chinese Communist Party's 20th Party Congress in Beijing last month, Xi Jinping succeeded in consolidating power, giving himself another five-year term as the head of China's ruling party, its state government, and its military. He repudiated attempts by his predecessor, Hu Jintao, to limit the term of the Chinese Communist Party's general secretary and its president to two terms, and sidelined Hu's style of collective, consensus-based leadership. It is also possible that Xi engineered Hu Jintao's sudden departure from the dais at the Party Congress, symbolizing the rejection of some of Hu's policies.

In his report to the CCP Congress on his second term, Xi defined China as "still on a long march to build a modern socialist society"—that is, still in a struggle to build its military while ensuring that the party never changes its nature. He also made clear that the party would be at the center of the state establishment and government, management of the economy, state and private enterprises, and the People's Liberation Army. He likewise installed loyal party members into the 24-member leading Politburo and its seven-member guiding Standing Committee.

These are unalloyed political victories for Xi and his leadership style. Even so, some changes are visible at the top of China's power structure—and these are likely to dictate the shape of Chinese politics and foreign policy in the years to come.

On the Politburo Standing Committee, new number-two leader Li Qiang will probably replace Li Keqiang as premier. Li Qiang brings experience as party secretary in Shanghai. Along with him is Ding Xuexiang, Xi's chief of staff, who also held positions in Shanghai. These are men who will be loyal to Xi and will aim to implement his policies. A third, Zhao Leji, has roots in Xi's home province of Shaanxi.

On the Politburo, meanwhile, Xi Jinping ensconced new member Ma Xingrui, who ran the repression of Muslims in Xinjiang—a move that does not bode well for policies on religious tolerance and human rights. There are also members connected to provinces key to the Chinese economy or to party policies like its "zero-COVID" pandemic plan. They are loyal to Xi, and both mirror and support his authoritarian style and centralized, top-down management of the party, government affairs, and policy.

In the Central Military Commission, a party and state body, Xi installed as vice chairmen two strong loyalists known for their knowledge of modern military strategy, technology, and hardware. One, General Zhang Youxia, had combat experience in China's 1979 conflict with Vietnam and supported Xi's 2015-2016 reforms of the PLA. The other, General He Weidong, commanded a group army in Fujian province, opposite Taiwan—the same province where Xi Jinping had his own formative experiences as a Communist Party secretary and political commissar of a PLA reserve unit. General He Weidong's background means that an officer with decades of experience planning for an invasion of Taiwan is now advising Xi.

Which brings us to foreign policy. Xi's strengthened political hand at home is likely to have collateral—and unhelpful—effects on the country's role in the world. U.S. policymakers and legislators can expect a newly empowered Xi to thumb his nose at recent Western sanctions and threats, while strengthening the authority of the CCP in controlling the power of the state and developing indigenous products. Under Xi, China will continue seeking to dominate supply chains and to control vital resources or materials or energy wherever and whenever possible.

Chinese espionage, too, is likely to rise. China can be counted on to increase its cyber penetrations, recruitment of foreign talent, and technology transfer schemes. The goal is to gather technological prowess and to speed China's own research and development in what it sees as a long-term competition with the West.

During his presentation at the Party Congress, Xi used the term "reform and opening." The phrase has a precise meaning in Communist understanding, and it's far from innocuous. China's Communist Party will install functionaries in foreign and domestic enterprises, joint ventures and financial institutions. It will likewise open the door to foreign investment and industry, but on its own terms. Meanwhile, Xi's vaunted "Belt and Road" initiative will continue to seek foreign outlets for China's goods and bring in raw materials and food.

China's Party Congress took place against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, and CCP policies are likely to be affected by it. Russia's military stumbles in Ukraine have not been lost on Xi, and those failures will likely make Beijing more cautious about an invasion of Taiwan—at least in the short term. But they have also been instructive to Xi about the capabilities required to accomplish his ultimate goal of "reunification."

Xi will focus on building the PLA into what he has termed a "world-class" military, one that can maintain a threatening posture against both Taiwan and the U.S. Beijing sees the retaking of Taiwan not as a question of "if," but of "when." And China's leader now has more tools than ever before to make this vision a reality.

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