

## The rise and rise of Xi Jinping

The recently-concluded 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was an intricately choreographed political theatre which showcased President Xi Jinping's primacy, his vision and his status as the helmsman of the party and the nation. China's confidence in the validity of its chosen path and its ambitions of "restoring" its global leadership role were also on full display.

While this conclave was more about reaffirmation of trends evolving since Mr. Xi's ascendance to power at the 18th Party Congress, rather than charting out new policy directions, it has significant implications for India.

The Congress has confirmed Mr. Xi's standing as the most powerful Chinese leader in the post-Deng era. His vision for the future of China, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era", is enshrined in the party constitution as part of its guiding ideology.

A Xinhua commentary gushingly suggests that "Xi Jinping's thought will be China's signature ideology and the new communism", the implication being that it supersedes and encompasses the doctrinal offerings of previous leaders.

Mr. Xi has become the only leader after Mao (with his "Mao Zedong Thought") to have his eponymous ideological contribution written into the party charter while in office. "Deng Xiaoping Theory" was adopted after Deng's death, and contributions of two of Mr. Xi's predecessors, Hu Jintao ("Scientific Outlook") and Jiang Zemin ("Three Represents"), are not named after them.

While this self-elevation and his position as the "lingxiu", a wise and great leader, makes Mr. Xi the principal arbiter of China's future directions over the next five years and possibly beyond, it does not yet put him on a par with Mao and Deng. Arguably, Deng did not need a theory named after him or to hold many offices to bring about transformational changes in China. Mr. Xi is a transformative leader in the making but has a long way to go before he can rival Mao and Deng in impact and legacy.

Mr. Xi has, however, taken decisive steps to move away from Deng's legacy in four key areas: collective leadership; identification of successors well ahead of the transfer of power; a measure of differentiation between the party and the state; and the dictum of China biding its time, keeping a low profile and never claiming leadership.

Deng had institutionalised collective leadership to correct the problems of "excessive concentration of power" witnessed under Mao. With Mr. Xi steadily accumulating levers of authority and eliminating rivals, there has been a shift towards personalised rule in his first term and now at the Party Congress. The erosion of checks that it involves has attendant risks for China.

The new Politburo is packed with Mr. Xi's close associates. By one count, there are as many as 14 of his allies among 25 members of the Politburo. However, the composition of the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) is more balanced and possibly the result of a compromise, thus suggesting limits to Mr. Xi's authority. Premier Li Keqiang has retained his position, along with Mr. Xi, and of five new members, only one (Li Zhanshu) is seen as a Xi protégé, while others have links to his predecessors but cannot be described as rivals. Mr. Xi had changed virtually all Provincial Party Secretaries in the months ahead of the 19th Congress, and appointments since the Congress have underlined his sway over personnel matters.

In another departure from the post-Deng practice, no potential successor to Mr. Xi has been included in the new line-up of the PBSC. This has kept open the possibility of him staying on as the paramount leader or the power behind the throne well beyond 2022, when he completes his second term as the party leader.

Though the party constitution rules out “life tenure”, it sets no term limits for any office, unlike the state constitution which has a two-term limit for presidency and other senior positions. It is still too early to figure out how the post-2022 scenario will pan out, but it seems unlikely today that Mr. Xi will completely exit from the leadership position as his predecessor Hu Jintao did at the end of his second term.

The absence of a succession plan has potential perils in a party which has witnessed destructive factional feuds in the past.

Mr. Xi’s penchant for the dominance of the party, including in the economic domain, has received a boost at the Congress. In his work report, he reaffirmed a key message of his 2013 third plenum policy statement that the market should play the “decisive” role in allocation of resources but the state would take the “leading role” in the economy. His preference for maintaining a strong state and party role in the economy with minimal privatisation of state-owned assets and firm control over social and financial risks is unlikely to change in the wake of the Congress. Likewise, while he is positioning China as a defender of globalisation, it comes with a strong dose of mercantilism.

For India, one key outcome of the party conclave is the articulation of China’s increasingly explicit great power ambitions. In his speech, Mr. Xi talked about China becoming “a global leader of composite national strength and international influence” and moving closer to the centre-stage by mid-century. A Xinhua commentary of October 24 is more candid: “By 2050... China is set to regain its might and re-ascend to the top of the world.”

In sync with Mr. Xi’s “Chinese dream” enunciated five years ago, an overarching theme of the Party Congress was the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and “restoration” of China’s centrality on the global stage. In his speech, Mr. Xi spoke of China as a “strong country” or “great power” as many as 30 times, jettisoning the earlier coyness about the country’s great power ambitions.

The preoccupation with building up global combat capabilities to safeguard China’s overseas interests also figures prominently in Mr. Xi’s vision. Arguably the most ambitious restructuring of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in the last 50 years currently underway is focussed on joint command, power projection capability and the party’s control on the military. Mr. Xi has set the goal of completing modernisation of the armed forces by 2035 and transforming the PLA into a world-class military by 2050.

In a significant departure from China’s position in the post-Mao period of not seeking to export its model, Mr. Xi has suggested that “the Chinese path... offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence, and it offers Chinese wisdom and approach to solving problems facing mankind”. It is to be seen how far China will go to promote its model as an alternative to liberal, capitalist democracy and the “Washington Consensus”.

However, China is likely to intensify its efforts to shape its periphery and forge a “world community of shared destiny” centred around it. With the U.S. in temporary retreat and the West distracted by internal challenges, China considers this to be a period of strategic opportunity to take its great power project to the next level in the new era that Mr. Xi has envisioned.

Mr. Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the key instrument in this grand strategy and it is now embedded in the party constitution. There is nothing to suggest that China is inclined to address India's concerns about the BRI.

In a development possibly linked to China's enhanced global agenda, for the first time since 2003, the Politburo includes a diplomat, State Councillor Yang Jiechi. As the Chinese special representative for boundary talks with India, he has had extensive interactions with us.

It may also be noted that since his 2014 visit to India, President Xi has emerged as the principal Chinese interlocutor for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the past, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh engaged primarily with Premier Wen Jiabao. Given Mr. Xi's pre-eminence, his being personally invested in the relationship with India has its advantages.

Looking ahead, a more assertive China will be one of the most critical factors shaping India's external environment, apart from engendering new challenges in the management of bilateral relations, more so as the footprints of the two re-emergent countries will increasingly overlap.

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